

## West Highland Way Race 2007 95 Happy Miles

This year's training started terribly, I put my back out on New Year's Eve, what made it worse was I wasn't doing anything daft and was sober too. So January 1<sup>st</sup> the day I normally start to focus on the race wasn't what I'd planned, I ended up with two weeks off work and £200 on a chiropractor but money well spent. If I'm going to have a month out I suppose January was the right one to pick! So in February I got back into my schedule, running slowly but able to cover the distance and as the months progressed so did my training with no more mishaps.

The week before the race I felt calm, prepared, and ready to go. But the weather reports on the race website forum were not good, I had no plans to check the weather, because what ever it was I would cope with it. There is no such thing as bad weather only bad clothing and I planned to have at least three of everything in my arsenal. But it doesn't matter how good your Gore-tex, it wouldn't be much use in a flash flood carrying boulders in it's path, I was starting to panic, how would I react if the race was stopped for safety. I emailed Bob Allison my concerns. His voice of reason told me to stop worrying, I'm more than capable, get my head down and nail the 30 hours, just go for it! He was right, I calmed down; of course I'll do it,

On Friday I just ate or slept while waiting for Pauline and Val to pick me up at 10.00pm with enough gear to kit out an army. At Milngavie greeted the old faces and some new ones with best wishes for this year's race, Steven King, making his debut, looked absolutely petrified. At the race briefing I was right at the back and couldn't hear, but managed to catch something about the weather, we might get thunder and lightning but if we do it will be in the early stages and in daylight. That's fine I can live with that.

At 1.00am after the obligatory team photo, we were off, all 104 of us. After all the preparation and waiting it was good to get going. I was still smiling at Bob's challenge, last week I'd set Bob a quiz (a Munro bagger with the full set) I emailed him a photo of me sitting on top of Blaven, a Munro on Skye, offering him a Mars Bar as a prize if he knew where I was. He won it easy and promised to give me back the Mars Bar if I broke Russell Adams time of 28 ½ hours from a few years ago. I was confident of knocking an hour off my previous time and getting under 30 hours but Russell's time? We'll see.

Kept it nice and easy in the dark, staying relaxed, as I turned into the field at Drymen, I was careful not to tread on the hedgehog trundling across my path, I phoned Pauline to say I was on my way, I wasn't stopping just swapping the rucksack for the bum bag, I forgot to tell them I wasn't slowing down either; I was running up the road trailing my rucksack in one hand waiting for some one to take it. "Come on, hurry up!" They soon got into gear and I had my bum bag. I had a wee panic when I came to a sign that said "West Highland Way Closed" and a big arrow pointing down hill, I didn't like the look of the diversion because what goes down must come back up, also I couldn't see the couple of guys that were just in front so I decided to stick to the proper path, my rational being that the path is closed for forestry work and at this time in the morning any tree-chopper-downer will still be tucked up in bed. The rain was heavy and there was no sign of it letting up, went over the stile where there used to be trees, looked to my left, Conic hill wasn't there, it was totally hidden in clouds, oh well, no view from the top this morning then! Plodded on and over the top to be cheered on by the Scouts who were there to see the sunrise, then magically a big hole opened in the clouds and I could see up the loch. Wow! The view! It made climbing the hill in the rain worthwhile. Took the descent gently, complicated by my phone ringing, but I was able to tell Pauline and Val I would be going straight through Balmaha, have my coffee and rice pudding ready also my Gore-tex jacket, the one I was wearing wasn't quite up to the job. Val had a hard task chasing me up the road with my mug; a wee tip, next time put the lid on! Pauline had to walk up the hill with me as I enjoyed my caffeine hit, passed Pauline my mug and banana skin, see ya at Rowardennan.

Rowardennan was where my support came into their own, I sat in the big foldy chair as Pauline and Val grabbed a foot each and like a mirror image they worked together, wet wipes, Body Glide (stuff like Vaseline but better) fresh socks and trail shoes, "Val, I thought you didn't do feet!" A quick squirt of Skin So Soft, refuelled rucksack and I was off within 6 minutes. I'm not a numbers junkie and I run to my heart and soul not the watch, gadgets and gizmos but I wanted to know how I was doing. I was told I was 19 minutes ahead of last year's time. Righty-ho! A good start, 27 miles in, that's the warm up done, time to keep a good effort without over doing it. Took a mental note to reprimand my crew, when they filled my drinks bladder, I only wanted a litre in it but they didn't squash the air out. My juice was sloshing around like an old washing machine!

I had quite a lot of company along the side of Loch Lomond, a few race virgins, I felt for Shirley, she had lost the path somewhere after Rowardennan and found herself in thick bracken and couldn't retrace her steps, she ended up wading up the loch for around 20 minutes until she could get back on the track. Trying to find a silver lining for her I commented that at least the cold water would be invigorating for her legs! Also Derek and Stephen Morley, who blame me for them ever running this race, a few year's ago I was running with them at Glenrothes 50km and said something about a great wee race they'll need to do. I think this is their third WHW. This was the only section of the race I hadn't covered in training this year, but it was indelibly etched on my memory, took it nice and easy, I wanted both legs intact to be able to run again when I got onto easier ground. I did well hanging on to my ginger jam sandwich when my toe got caught on root and I felt over to my right, it wasn't much of a fall, but a sharp boulder found my right shin. Once I was up I didn't look at it, wasn't sure what I'd see but my leg took my weight so must've been ok. Picked up some juice and a chicken roll at the checkpoint in Inversnaid, I drank some juice and put the roll in my bag, I wasn't going to eat it until I felt secure in the knowledge that I didn't need both hands for hanging onto rocks or trees to keep my vertical. This section did seem to take a lot longer than I expected but was relieved to reach the flat grassy stretch that signalled the end of the dodgy terrain, hurray! I can get my roll out now. The legs were strong and moving well, making good time to Beinglas Farm where I changed back to the bum bag and ate a rice pudding, I asked about my time and was told I was still ahead, they'll tell me exactly by how much at Derrydaroch Farm. I tootled off up the path approaching half way doing a wee stock take of how I was feeling. I was surprised and delighted to realise my legs were supple and strong, I had to repeat it to myself "My legs are supple and strong!" just to make it sink in how good they felt. My stomach was happy, the only thing I had to show for forty odd miles and lacking a night's sleep was that I was scrunching my eyes up, the sun wasn't shining but looking at the path I found it too bright. Right, ok, just my head was tired! That's fine; you don't need a head for running. Chickens do it all the time! With that thought I had a little chuckle to myself and headed into Derrydaroch Farm where they had the big chair and fresh socks ready, they must have been a bit tired too, it took them seven minutes to do my feet, find my sunglasses and tell me I was now forty minutes ahead.

On the path along to the forest above Crianlarich I had William for company, a first timer from Nottingham, he'd seen Val and Pauline working on my feet and thought it looked nice but he didn't dare take his shoes off. We blethered through the steep climbs and dips where the rain came back, propped the sunglasses on my head in poser mode and pulled my sleeves back down, didn't bother with a jacket, it wasn't cold. After crossing the A82 Pauline met me in the field, she had walked out from Auchtertyre Farm with my soup, I decided I was wasting a good running stretch walking on the flat road and started to run but soon gave up, it was too hard trying to eat a portion of Mrs Baxter's best Scotch Broth and phone home to report I'm still alive and well, I do deserve a wee breather occasionally don't I? It was good having Auchtertyre Farm as the checkpoint because I've always felt Tyndrum took ages to come in although only a further three miles away, so happily trundled off, fed and watered knowing Pauline would join me at Tyndrum (53 miles).

At Tyndrum it took me ages to cross the road, didn't mind being a headless chicken but didn't want to be a dead one, where's a lollypop lady when you need one! Now seventy minutes ahead, I've got my hour but how good can I make it, my head had woke up, legs still bouncing along and

even better, my feet were in excellent condition, in the past at this point I've had more plasters than skin, I was buzzing, there is no way I'm letting this go. Pauline had fun with my new digital camera also nattering away with Neil MacRitchie and his support the section to Bridge of Orchy whooshed in. Now at Bridge of Orchy I felt as if I was in the eye of a storm while the tornado whirled around me, I was sat calmly in the big foldy chair, (giggling to myself again) with Pauline at my feet, throwing my shoes and socks over her shoulder as she did my feet, changing to fresh socks and my second pair of trail shoes, Val was one handed preparing my rice-pudding with honey and a mug of hot chocolate, George (supporting Steven) had taken this moment to phone. All this mayhem was over in six minutes; Val and I were walking up the hill as I drank my hot chocolate. Pauline shouted "See you at Kingshouse."

"Oy! Hang on! You'll need to come up the hill, I'm not carrying my mug all the way to Kingshouse!" When Pauline returned a guy was helpfully clearing the road of all my debris, he gently kicked it closer to the car for Pauline to tidy up, her task after that was to drive round to Kingshouse with Val's brand new car, a clever one that knows all by itself when to put lights and wipers on, all Pauline had to do was point it in the right direction and not hit anything, not like the support driver I saw early in the race on the B821 where the WHW crosses over at four miles in. The driver was moving up the road slowly with the back near side door wide open. I wondered if he knew. Oh, he does now; it's just hit a tree!

Val and I had a good steady pace along Rannoch Moor, discussing what clothes I'd take with me over the Devil's Staircase. Decided since I'm still moving well, I don't think I'll get as cold as last year so I'll just take the tracksters then heard what we both thought was thunder, ok, I'll take the Gore-tex trousers. Kept a strong pace up and over the hill, Kingshouse now in sight, usually what happens when you hit hard tarmac after a long trail run, you legs die a horrible death (if the wheels don't fall off the bogey they at least turn square), after descending the rough path and down on to road at Glencoe Ski Centre I still felt amazingly good, I lengthened my stride to give my legs a stretch and cruised down the road I could also see how well I was doing, the sun was still high above Buachaille Etive Mor last year it was going down behind the Devil's Staircase then I heard a stern voice behind me "FIONA, EASE UP!" Val had slowed to phone Pauline with instructions but couldn't get a signal; she had to work hard to get back to me, she continued her reprimand, "You've a long way to go yet!" I had to explain I wasn't pushing, only stretching my legs, honest. Val was concerned, and wasn't going to let me work too hard too soon. After crossing the road Val put a sprint on into Kingshouse to find Pauline with a change of instruction, with me being ahead of schedule, she wouldn't have my pasta ready. Val had suggested I wait for it. Ha! Not on my list of options, I'll just get it at the bottom of the Devil. At the car Pauline had some clothes ready for me she also shoved in my mouth a great huge chunk of chocolate (Yorkie It's Not For Girls, we now know why it's not for girls. On the "Things not to tell your runner 'til later" list Pauline admitted that she couldn't break the chunks apart and had to bite the piece off for me, I didn't notice the teeth marks.) Also a ploy to stop me shouting at her, but it failed "No, not that fleece, the blue one and my Saltire Buff scarf and the clear glasses". After getting the fleece on Pauline told me to bugger off, she would catch me up with my refuelled rucksack and Val will drive along to Altna-feadh to prepare my pasta. I was now 1hr 52 mins ahead of last year's time.

Enjoyed my pasta walking up the Devil's Staircase, Pauline taking loads more photos on the way up. The top and its still daylight, what a boost and a novelty! What a difference it made being able to see and so much easier to pick a route through the rocks and on the steep descent managed to run well finding that fine line of running well but not going too fast getting out of control and having to use my quads as brakes. Into Kinlochleven with another confusing diversion but I followed this one as it was marked WHW Race, I thought the checkpoint had changed but you came out at the usual place only going round the back of manky factories instead of the nice path through woods, oh well, got there anyway. Kinlochleven was heaving with midges, they were getting under my glasses, a close fitting wrap around style I wear specifically to keep the beasties out ma face! I skooshed Pauline in the face with the Skin So Soft as she changed my socks for the last time, drank my oxo as fast as I could went over to the checkpoint in the Health Centre and announced "That's number two in and number two out!" relieved to get out of that heebie-jeebie inflicting pit. Val soon caught me up. Right this is where I'll start making an effort, fifteen miles to

go, in the past I've found this section the toughest, struggling slowly along while the Lairig Mor maliciously laughs in my face as it winds on and on throwing stones at my toes, biting my bum and slapping my face making me think death could be a pleasant experience. It's not getting me this year, I still feel good, legs still supple and strong, stomach happy, only a blister on the ball of my left foot and there's no way that will slow me down, I'm now 3.15 hours ahead and moving well, Val set a fast pace and I kept with it. The light was going but still didn't need torches we could see a light in the distance, it wasn't moving, it couldn't be runners, didn't puzzle over it for too long. I looked up, whoa! My fourth WHW and my first real hallucination, I can see a car parked on the Lairig Mor... Aw! Wait a minute, there really is a great big 4X4 sitting there, an extra checkpoint since there is now access up and a phone signal at this point. Oh well! Disappointing but puzzle solved. I put my torch on, it still wasn't too dark but it gave me something to follow, as it got darker the path seemed to get harder, stopped running, but didn't slow too much it just used less energy to walk with a good long stride over the stones and puddles but broke into the odd stagger as my feet skittered over boulders, Val gave her ankle quite a sore one but she carried on regardless. I kept pointing my torch up the path looking for the trees; although it's good it was no searchlight, but eventually I could smell the forest before I saw it, (why don't pine air fresheners ever smell this good).

At Lundavra Pauline gave me my last mug of coffee and took over the reins for the last push. Val went off to find her black car abandoned by Pauline on a pitch-dark track somewhere between Lundavra and Fort William. Both Pauline and Val had been good at reminding me to eat and drink along the way but it wasn't difficult, my guts were good, possibly something to do with the large quantity of crystallised ginger I've munched all the way. We kept a good pace through the spooky woods, I'd given Pauline permission to shout, bully and do whatever it takes to keep me going and not to slow down on the last 10km but I was on a high the whole way she didn't have to say much. When we were going over the Devil's Staircase she gave me a pep talk, "When it gets dark you might take a dip in spirit and energy but get aggressive and fight it." It never happened, I was still giggling to myself. I stumbled across the stones and let out a yell. "Yike-arroonies!" What kind of aggressive, fighting talk is that! I thought. Pauline never commented or looked round, just as well, don't know what she would of thought of the manic grin on my chops. Over the stile and onto the wide forest track, Pauline looked up and noticed there were torches just behind us. "That's ok they can go past me if they want. But they're going to have to be good to do it." Earlier in the race I had considered changing my shoes at Lundavra going back to the road shoes I had worn up to Rowerdennan but I didn't bother, nothing was going to help or hinder my sprint finish. On the steep downhill of the forest track I lengthened my stride, pushing a hard 10km effort breathing my lungs inside out. We caught and went past another runner who was walking a good pace, it was Alan Young one of the race's fore-fathers who did most of his WHWs before the archives began coming out of retirement to celebrate a birthday. Goan yersel auld yin! (If the Brechin Boy ever reads this I'll get a cuff roon the lug fur ma cheek!) Carried on down the hill. Pauline shouted at me, "Your posture's going get your head up!" I was struggling to see the path in my torchlight and said as much. Pauline replied my torch looked bright enough to her. She was right, I took my glasses off they were steaming up. "Here, you have them." At the Braveheart car park Pauline got the phone out to let Val know we were on our way in, "Don't bother, there's Val." She was waiting in the car park. Onto the road and into street lights for the last mile gave Pauline my torch, didn't bother to switch it off, she can deal with it. Wasn't sure if I would manage to wind it up much more for a sprint finish, I was going as hard as I could already. I went past a runner but didn't have breath to acknowledge her at least Pauline had the manners to do so. Where is the Leisure Centre, I can't keep this effort up for much longer. At last, I can see it. Pauline sprinted ahead to get a photo, I giggled to myself again and thought, "You're going to have to go faster than that!" as I wound it up a smidgen, she failed. Luckily Val was there and caught my moment of glory. Number two finished in 26 hrs 14 mins 48 secs knocking 4hrs 46 mins from last years PB. What a race! I don't think it could have been any better; I must be a proper loony to have laughed all the way round but I really did enjoyed every minute.

There are no words adequate to thank Pauline and Val for their support and ability to adjust as I constantly surprised them as I arrived in every checkpoint ahead of schedule. My total stop time

was 20 minutes and the longest being 7 minutes. I do get to return the favour for Pauline when she runs for GB in Canada next month. (I think twins do make excellent support for each other, we've been poking each other in the eye since before we were born, and I won't have a problem watching her hurt as she attempts to break her own Scottish 24 hour record.) Val, any time you need me for a daft adventure I'll be there.

Bob congratulated me and handed over the Mars Bar, he asked what would I do for a whole box full. I answered sub 24. But just a box of Thornton's Continental will do it. So Bob, you'd better be standing at the Leisure Centre at around ten to one in the morning on June 22<sup>th</sup> 2008 with my choccies!

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