

WEST HIGHLAND WAY RACE - Kate's story.

19th June 2004

On Mull, four weeks ago as I ran back down the road to Salen in the boat race accompanied by not only Davy but by total exhaustion and nausea I swore blind that I would not do the WHW this year. This seemed a wise decision having done no long distance "training" as such since last year's WHW, apart from some 'big' races- Speyside, Stuc, the Boat Race and Jura.

So it was with humble intrepidity that I hovered on the start line at 1am in the pitch black of a cold night. The first great thing about this race is when they say "Go!", unlike most races, you don't actually have to hurry in any shape or form! The effort is minimal. With a slightly dodgy knee and lack of training, I decided that it didn't matter if I only made the first check at Balmaha. This removed self induced pressure. I enjoyed the gentle movement through the still and silent blackness.

I soon realised that I had a very strong and experienced lady running behind me. 'Behind' soon became 'in front' and I could see I had a serious battle on my hands. One which it was far too early to fight, though instinct made me eager. I resisted, however Sharon seemed to stop at the foot of Conic Hill and I pressed on.

Time flew and I still felt strong at the end of Loch Lomond, and even by Crianlarich the usual debilitating pain in my quads had not yet appeared. I was amazed and considered that in my best year (2000) I had done the least training and in 2002, (the year that I quit with 5 miles to go), the most.

By Tyndrum my quads were rapidly stiffening, but I was still 4th so had a good incentive to push on, having not seen any runners or changed positions since Rowardennan. Marshals look on bemused as I stretched with a few press-ups, squats and other FASIC contortions at Bridge of Orchy, where the pain was really setting in along with mild nausea.

At Victoria Bridge, Stewart, on perfect cue as usual, produced the ordered tin of pears which I ate with a road-side rhododendron branch. A Highland Council ranger snapped pictures of this distressed exhausted stranger eating like a cannibal. Goodness only knows where these will end up!

I knew Rannoch Moor would kill me. It always does. I could feel it coming on. It was engulfing my body and mind. Smothering me. I couldn't jog properly anymore. I couldn't bear to see the angular stony path stretching relentlessly for miles ahead. I couldn't bear either food or drink. Then I fell asleep, running.

I reckon the 65th mile finished my glycogen stores, and accompanied with the pain, my body had simply had enough. That's where the stubborn angry determination came in handy. I picked myself up and forced a nauseating tearful jog. I was fighting with my brain to stay awake and with my eyes to stay open. The cooking up of this surely disastrous recipe, which would have produced 'cold runner asleep in heather' was broken by the revelation that the figure approaching me was Davy. Tearful, I managed to shuffle down to Kingshouse, where he had been meant to meet me for the final legs.

Nausea was raging and I couldn't even suck a sweet and I most certainly couldn't contemplate running as 'tummy jogging' and 'quad jarring' would be certain to make me sick. I pleaded to drop out, but was clearly arguing with my own mind as I also seemed to walking towards Altnafeadh. Then I was swinging my arms as if running. Then lifting my legs a little. At last I was shuffling. And then jogging. But I wasn't me doing this race anymore, it was my support. Davy had got me going from the dead. Then it lashed and there were several thousand Caledonian Challengers flooding down on to us like a waterfall.

Spirits up a bit I gritted my teeth on the jarring descent into Kinlochleven and took strength from how much less awful I felt than the year I had quit. Grasping at straws. I knew Michael (2nd) was about 20 minutes ahead but wasn't sure how close people behind were, especially Murdo who seemed to be going like a train when I last saw him. The second lady was also a worry.

Wade's road was as it always is, and as I expected it to be, hell. Never ending, jarring and full of loose rock and stones. But at least we could see for miles behind and there was no one there. Stewart and Chris came in from Lundavra and we all shuffled a few miles before they headed off to catch me for the final forest road descent. I reverted to age 6 with several childlike tantrums as I cried, kicked the ground, swore and stated unarguably that I wasn't going on any more. But that wasn't going to get me out of the hell I was in, so using my few remaining rational powers, I kept going... ..Going right until the Leisure Centre and then it was all over and then I got in the bath.

Grateful thanks: I can't emphasize how much, for me, this race is made possible by the patient, long suffering, thoughtful and dedicated support of my support team, and of all the many marshals en route and of course Dario Meleragni who puts so much hard work all year into this fantastic event. It is less than 24 hours since finishing and I think his addictive event will pull me till I make the magic time in my head. Why? That's another story for later.

Kate Jenkins