

West Highland Way 2004 race report

The pain...the pain - indescribable! It's 22.45hrs in the Glasgow Paisley Road Travel Lodge and my wife Gill is trying to get my contact lenses in...it's only the second time I have worn them and now I know why. Right they are finally in on fourth attempt. Check my equipment:

Technical stuff - I am wearing Helly Hansen long sleeve top. Lowe Alpine Adrenaline light weight waterproof top, Activskin tights from US (not things to have an accident in and be carted off to hospital wearing) and over these a pair of Montane light weight trail trousers. Montrail Hurricane XCR's (will change to Montrail hardrocks at Balhama), pair of trail gaiters c/o Joe Dana gaiters in the US (really excellent by the way and he is no relation)! a pair of Thorlos socks, Hine running gloves, Lowe Alpine hat. KIMM 25L sack - containing 3L camelback with Clip 2 electrolyte (ridiculously too large with hindsight). GU2 gels packed. Succeed ECAPS - lactate buffer tablets. Check the Nike C5 heart rate monitor - yep my heart is still beating. Ready to go.

Simeon, my support runner has the car packed and we are off to Milngavie rail station. We eventually find it and a heaving car park. We park up next to my running partner Duncan and his support team who had driven up from Coventry that day. Check in. Sign the declaration form - if I die it is down to me - pick up my bottle of beer and race pack. Back to the car - pick up head torch and eat a banana. Walk to the underpass. The race is about to start - it is midnight Saturday 19th June - I feel remarkably calm. I have trained hard for last 6 months and tapered for the last week. So that is it, turn on the head torch - we are off.

Milngavie - Balhama (20 miles) - arrive 03.51 hrs

It's a dry night, cool but not too cold as we run off. Dario (Race Director) had made the suggestion of doing some form of recce in advance. So, Duncan and I made the excellent decision to hike some of the route at Easter. We got to just past Bridge of Orchy carrying 2 stone (lightweight!) rucksacks. So we had a good idea of what to expect. My plan had been to run with Duncan, if we separated my idea was to tag behind others. I recognise that I am basically a lazy runner and need to be pushed. If not, being pulled around by others will do.

The run up Conic hill was a wet one. One of the runners in front of me stepped into some mud and fell. I managed to avoid him but my shoe also almost got sucked off as I vaulted. Arrived at the Balhama checkpoint. Gill and Simeon had some tea waiting, another banana. Changed top and shoes. Black toe nail on left foot finally decides to hang in mid air - so I pull it off. Would have been added to my collection of toe nails - but unfortunately my wife found them a few weeks before and binned them. Sometimes a marriage built on mutual trust and love comes close to blows! Dump head torch and skitter off again.

Balhama - Inversnaid (34 miles) - arrive 07.35hrs

So begins the trail along Loch Lomond. It never seems so long in a car. But we are on the other side from the road. Here the undulating ground, lurking tree roots and hard and loose rocks are a danger. No support at Inversnaid so grab some packet fruit, fill up water and grab another banana and keep moving.

Inversnaid - Derrydaroch (44 miles) - arrive 10.27hrs

Pass Rob Roy's cave - decide not to visit it, the same as I decided not to visit it during the Easter hike. One day I will see it. This is a hard section. Playing catch and pass with a couple of other runners. Arranged to meet Gill and Simeon at Beinglas - the campsite with wigwam huts (Duncan and I spent a pleasant night there during our hike - ok so we told everyone we were wild camping all the time....) After seeing the sign for Beinglas it feels like hours before it eventually comes into sight. Quick cup of tea and top change and off again. Derrydaroch appears soon - so another short rest and off. By now the Clip 2 is making me feel nauseous. So I switch to plain water.

Derrydaroch - Tyndrum (53 miles) - arrive 13.14hrs

Not long before I am crouching as I enter the sheep creep tunnel. Although I feel tired, it is easier to navigate when you are not carrying a rucksack. Quads begin to sing sweetly - recognise tune as the Funeral March. Up and downhill section now. Pass through St Fillian's priory. Get to Tyndrum for a short rest. Try a pot noodle but it is horrible. Offer a bit to a sparrow - he leaves it, flying off in disgust! Set off with yet another banana....

Tyndrum - Bridge of Orchy (59 miles) - arrive 15.14hrs

Long path here runs parallel to main road. Glance over left shoulder to see Gill and Simeon waving to me from the other side of the road. Beginning to cool a bit now. Excellent views of the Glencoe Mountains opening up. Run in quickly to Bridge of Orchy checkpoint. Given a bivvy bag here to carry for Rannoch Moor and beyond. Luckily Simeon allowed to carry it.

Bridge of Orchy - Kingshouse (72 miles) - arrive 18.33hrs

Agree that I will meet Simeon at Inveroran Hotel - a few miles on. Run the downhill section to the hotel at reckless pace. Stop at Hotel for a pint of orange and lemonade that Simeon has laid on. Next stage crosses Rannoch Moor. The difficult bit, apart from feeling tired, is navigating past the walkers in the Caledonian Challenge, another event happening in the reverse direction to ours. The majority are descending in droves using poles. One in ten appears to move out of the way. The rest continue to hold their line regardless of the knackered runner jogging his way uphill. Simeon leads the way trying to break their waves. Finally arrive at Kingshouse again trying to run the downhills. Gill has soup waiting. Notice Duncan arriving. He leaves before me.

Kingshouse - Kinlochleven (80 miles) - arrive 23.04hrs

Load up with more gels and set off. Experience my first bonk of the race as I head up the 'Devil's Staircase,' a 259m climb (seems more). Simeon guides me up step by step as I load with gel, banana and water. It takes me 45 minutes just to get to the top. Totally devastated - what a stupid thing to happen. I could have fuelled much earlier but didn't. Try and pick up the pace now. Although it is late at night we don't really need the head torches it is so light. Hallucinations or not I experience a strange sensation of light beams behind me. They seem like head torches approaching - but there is nobody there. Remember Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons? Pass the aluminium smelter and arrive at penultimate checkpoint. Gill has a cup of tea ready and Simeon and I have a rice pudding. Hang around the checkpoint a bit too long and the midges are biting. Gill has been sleeping in her midge net hat.

Kinlochleven - Fort William (95 miles) - arrive 06.03.23hrs position 47th

Shortly after leaving I bonk again. Not so severe but the 50gm carb GU2 gel sorts me out. Enjoy this last section. Passing many runners lying on ground resting. Finally see the Leisure centre in the distance and try and jog down the steep path to it. Arrive in 29hrs 03 minutes and have race number ceremoniously cut from my wrist (I think of the extra weight I had to carry and how this adversely affected my performance). Duncan and his support team arrived a little under an hour earlier.

After a few hours sleep in the Freelanders and a lovely hot shower, we make our way to the hotel for prize giving. No blisters, and legs feel pretty good although I feel very tired and drained. By now I have already decided to do the event again next year and have rationalised how to save over 5 hours in time (a discretely positioned helicopter being one option). Devastated to find that my finishing time is still 1 minute slower than Dario's (Race organiser) from many moons ago. This gives me even more determination to come back again. Duncan and I also raised £3400 for British Heart Foundation charity.

Lessons learned

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!
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 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)

Once again thanks to my support crew and to Dario for the event organisation. See you next year.

Mike Mason