

B. La Dieu 1999

My report of my running the 1999 West Highland Way, Scotland (WHW) really begins with my participation in the 1998 Massanutten Mountain Trails 100 Mile Run (MMT100). Prior to the MMT100 trail briefing by RD, Ed Demoney, Colin Kingsford, my friend from Montreal, was telling me and my wife Marilyn about this run in the Scotland that he was planning on doing. Colin invited me to come along for the attempt. The idea of doing a long trail run in Scotland through the highlands had immediate appeal to me. Marilyn also liked the idea as it gave us a good excuse to tour the Scotland. Colin promised to send me an email with the link to WHW race site so that I could get more information. Before you knew it Marilyn and I were planning an extended vacation in Scotland with me actively training and planning to run the 1999 WHW.

Dario Melaragni, the webmaster for the WHW website proved to be an valuable source of information and encouragement during my planning for the race. Dario assisted me with understanding the logistics necessary to complete the run. Unlike a typical 100 mile race here in the North America you must provide your own crew. Race management provides no aid and only serves to verify that you have passed into and out of the official check points along the 95 mile trail as you progress North from Milngavie to Fort William. With Dario's assistance I was able to gain an appreciation for race conditions that I was likely to encounter and gear that I needed to have. Based upon my several communications with Dario, and Dario's friend Stan Milne I concluded that the number one variable that had to be planned for was the weather. Both Dario and Stan told me that I should expect severe weather and that "waterproofs" were necessary and could well save my life. Taking the advice of Dario and Stan I purchased a lightweight Gortex running suit. which I hoped would be suitable.

My training for the race went very good and three weeks prior to the race I felt ready to go and anxious to run. I began my taper and looked forward to meeting Dario and Colin in Scotland upon our arrival.

Marilyn and my oldest son Ben would serve as my crew. Ben planned to pace me the last 23 miles of the run over the Devils Staircase to the finish per race rules that you must be either be paced or pair up with another competitor. The Race Director, Jim Stewart, had instituted this rule due to likelihood of severe weather to be encountered during the last two sections of the run. The last two sections are exposed and are notorious for severe weather.

Marilyn, Ben and I left Harrisburg, PA on Tuesday, June 15 for Newark International Airport for our flight to Glasgow. We arrived in Glasgow Wednesday morning and picked up our rental car and began a hair raising ride into Glasgow to our B&B driving on the left and not knowing quite where to go.

The plan was to meet Dario and Colin on Thursday morning to drive the course to give both Colin and I a better appreciation of what we were getting ourselves into as well as to show Marilyn and Ben where the crew access points were. Dario, also hoped that it would help avoid serious navigation problems during the run (more about this later). The day was gorgeous and the scenery spectacular. Based on what we observed both Colin and I felt that the run was doable and with good weather should be rather fast. We were psyched and confident. Marilyn and Ben were skeptical and both expressed the opinion that this run was not as easy as it looked. Marilyn specifically reminded me of my past failures. Nothing like having a crew full of encouragement and confidence in one's abilities.

On Friday I took it easy and tried to stay off my feet as much as possible in anticipation of the early Saturday morning start. Colin, Ben, Marilyn and I left our B&B at 1:00 AM through the streets of Glasgow to the start at the Milngavie Railway Station. Checked in and met Jim Stewart the RD and took care of the few administrative functions associated with the run such as signing the waiver, and

buying a tee shirt. The parking lot was chaos as each runner and crew was making last minute preparations for the days activities. Marilyn, Ben and I found a spot at the back of the parking lot and attempted to stay out of the way.

The race started promptly at 3:00 AM after a short briefing from Jim. I settled into a nice easy pace at the back of the pack. I was determined not to go out too fast. I like to start out easy and pick up the pace as the run progresses or at least maintain pace. I hoped to run an average pace of between 3.5 and 4 mph. It was quite comfortable at the start and very easy running. The trail is very runnable and I was able to make good time with only short walking breaks to climb small hills. I felt great and was deliberately holding myself back. I arrived at the first check point, Drymen (12 miles), near the back of the back and met Jim Stewart just before crossing the A811. Jim remarked: "Taking it kind of easy." to which I replied: "Its going to be a long day." At Drymen I made the first of many navigation errors. Believing that the trail headed into town I turned left and ran about 3/4 of a mile into town before deciding that I was not on the trail and had to back track to where the trail crossed the A811 and proceeded North to Balmaha. By now, I figured I was solidly in last place as no one but me would make such a dumb mistake.

After crossing the A811 the trail passes through the Garadhbhan Forest, a lovely pine forest. About this time it started to rain. I put on my Goretex jacket as I was getting chilled. After passing through the forest you encounter the first major climb up Conic Hill. The climb went ok except I tried to play soccer with a rock and managed to kick the toe nail off my big toe on my left foot. Boy did that hurt, I was limping for the next mile or so. Descended Conic Hill and entered the car park at Balmaha (20 miles) where I met Marilyn and Ben my dedicated crew who wanted to know why I took so long. I explained that I got lost and told them about my foot. Marilyn and Ben did not offer me much sympathy and encouraged me to get going as time was a wasting.

From the car park at Balmaha the trail parallels the East side of Loch Lomond to the next check point at Rowardennan (27 miles). The trail in this section should have been relatively easy to follow if it had not been for the logging operation that was in progress. Sections of the forest had been clear cut with the trail being relocated. Again with my keen sense of direction I managed to get off trail. Never did find the trail as I think it was logged over and obliterated in sections. I managed to hook up with another runner at this point who kept me from going too far off track. The trail was proving tough to run as the rain had picked up and trail had turned into a quagmire with ankle deep mud. In any event, we zig-zagged our way to Rowardennan well at the back. With my wonderful navigation abilities fully intact I now believe I was about 1 hour behind where I would have been had I made no mistakes. Met Marilyn and Ben at Rowardennan for some needed support and encouragement. Marilyn and Ben were not happy campers as it looked like that they would be confined to the car all day because of the weather.

Left Rowardennan after a short break to refuel and fill my water bottles. The next section of trail with the exception of a short section of double track gravel road was very slow going. Running this section I encountered mud, rocks, Burn (stream) crossings, and generally poor footing. The best part about this section is that I didn't get lost! Although, I fell several times after slipping on the rocks. This section of trail had many great views of the Loch and adjoining countryside. I tried to take some pictures but the lens on my camera had fogged over due to the rain. The rain was now a down pour and I was thoroughly soaked, so much for Goretex. Fortunately I have sufficient extra padding and was quite comfortable. I pulled into Beinglas Farm (40 miles) in good shape. I was feeling good and had picked off two runners in this section. Marilyn and Ben had to walk about a half mile to the check point and were soaked despite carrying umbrellas. Seeing them and knowing the hardship that they were enduring made me really appreciate the effort that they were making on my behalf. I refilled my water bottles drank some Coke and ate a half of sandwich.

Leaving Beinglass Farm I began making my way North to the next check point at Tyndrum. Marilyn and Ben were to meet me approximately half way where the trail crosses the A82 and at Tyndrum.

Along this section I hooked up with Jim Roberston an experienced WHW runner who had completed the run 9 times in the past. I figured, if I stick with Jim I shouldn't get lost. The first half of this section is quiet exposed and parallels the River Falloch which feeds Loch Lomond and crosses many Burns. Because of the heavy rain the River and Burns were over there banks and covered the trail. In many cases you had to wade through the edge of the river and fast moving Burns. I again fell several times and was covered with mud from head to foot. I kept saying to myself are we having fun yet? I crossed the A82 with Jim and completely forgot that I was supposed to meet Marilyn and Ben. Fortunately they had turned the wipers on saw me claiming the hill after the highway crossing. Ben called to me and I descended to meet them. They were a welcome site. Because of the heavy rain I stopped only briefly to refuel and drink some coke. I thanked them and looked forward to meeting them at Tyndrum

This section of trail from the A82 crossing to Tyndrum is rolling hills through patches of forest. I felt that this was the most beautiful section of the run as it passed over several fast flowing Burns and rivers flowing out of the mountains. By this time my shoes and socks had accumulated a significant volume

of grit and mud that had to be dealt with. I took my shoes off and cleaned my socks and shoes in a fast flowing Burn which acted like a washing machine, great job with little effort. Again, I mis-navigated, at a trail junction I took a left instead of a right and was headed into Crianlarich (it was downhill).

Fortunately, I encountered backpackers who recognized that I was in the race and set me straight. I back tracked and headed in the correct direction and made it to Tyndrum (53 miles) without further incident. By this time it was raining so hard that everyone at the check point was hunkered down in there cars.

Marilyn and Ben were quickly losing their enthusiasm for the run. They encouraged me to get what I needed and to get going. I refueled and quickly got out of Dodge.

The next section of trail to the Bridge of Orchy check point is totally exposed. Now I had to not only deal with rain but also the high wind. I estimate that the winds were gusting between 40 and 60 mph. Many times the rain was blowing the rain horizontal. Boy is this fun. To help stay warm I put on a thin plastic emergency poncho which helped to break the wind. The poncho did the trick as I was quite comfortable till the finish. This section of trail should have been a no brainer for navigation, however after crossing the Auch Gleann River I became confused. I ran up the trail for about a mile and half and convinced myself that I was going the wrong way and back tracked to the river and the last trail marker. I stood in the rain and confused and bewildered and I tried to figure out which way to go. Fortunately for me two runners (fellow Americans) came along and pointed me in the correct direction. For this foul up I got to run this section of trail 3 times: up, down and up again. Despite my habitual navigation errors I was still in good spirits and looking forward to seeing my crew at Bridge of Orchy (60 miles).

The weather at Bridge of Orchy was so bad that I took barely enough time to say hello, get a little to eat and drink and refuel for the next stretch to Kingshouse. Marilyn and Ben were to meet me at Victoria Bridge (63 miles) prior to going over the Rannoch Moor. This section of trail passed like a blur. I was feeling good, didn't get off trail and just kept my head down fighting the wind and rain. When I arrived at Victoria Bridge the rain had somewhat abated and Marilyn and Ben were willing to get out of the car. Marilyn told me that Dario was only 20 minutes ahead that I was gaining on him. I looked forward to catching him and spending some time on trail with my new friend. I refueled drank some coke and took off after Dario. This section of trail goes over the Rannoch Moor on an old drovers road. There isn't a tree in sight and the wind and rain were whistling. Also, along this section of the run I had to contend with dozens of hikers who were doing a charity walk.. The hikers were heading South whereas I was heading North. The trail was so crowded that you couldn't even take a pee in private. I made good progress and met Marilyn and Ben just outside Kingshouse (71 miles).

Marilyn told me that the run was stopped because of the severe weather and potentially very dangerous conditions North of Kingshouse and that my race was over. I was initially disappointed because I was feeling good and ready to continue but accepted the RD's decision. Marilyn and Ben were ecstatic as they had been trapped in the car for the entire day. My official time to Kingshouse

was 19 hours 56 minutes. Not the greatest time but considering my poor navigation and tough running conditions I was very satisfied.

This West Highland Way Race is great run. The countryside is spectacular, the people wonderful and the weather unpredictable. If you plan on doing the run plan and expect the worst. But most of all plan to have a great time. I did!