

WEST HIGHLAND WAY RACE (95m/8,000)

(or:- Jim Hall tells the whole truth for a change, after having been found innocent in the Scottish Mountain Trial)

My 1988 serious attempt at the West Highland Way was abruptly curtailed in the Milngavie railway station car park, five minutes before the start. An argument with a kerbstone whilst sprinting to answer a last minute call of nature resulted in a badly grazed hand and, more seriously, a concussed knee (and my weak one at that).

I was non too keen to run a 95 mile race anyway, but unfortunately I have a forceful wife who insisted I navigate and provide moral support (lucky is the man who gets nagged only to mow the lawn, etc.). Nothing could keep me from the official start group photograph however, and thus I was press-ganged into running, regardless of physical state.

The first five mile section to Carbeth was unforgettable, the dawn chorus set to a scene of mist shrouded lochans and disturbed only by 20-odd shuffling runners in whispered, anxious repartee. Alas, I had no right to be with these running Olympians and to save any more embarrassment I handed in my number at Carbeth. The solo return run to Milngavie was even more serene and visions of sitting in sun-baked beer gardens occupied my thoughts as I hastened to rendezvous with the competitors, this time with a carload of goodies.

Betty was last at Killearn, but still on our 23 hour schedule and unaccountably fourth at Balmaha, at 06:35, 30 minutes ahead of schedule. As the midgets and the heat increased the positions at Rowardennan were unchanged with most runners looking very determined and some even looking strong. Already it was possible to identify possible non-finishers because the Rowardennan midge is capable of picking on weaker prey. Spectators suffered even more than runners and I will never forget the picture of Bobby Shields and the "yellow peril" surrounded by a mist of flying teeth in the dawn sunshine (even he, the course marshal, retired defeated at this point). Highland Way trekkers were stirring for their third day's breakfast as competitors ran past, travellers in a different rhythm of time.

It was now a race of car versus runner to meet the next support point at Inverarnan which I made with some time to spare and promptly set off south, on foot and with vittals, to search for my better half. Round a corner in the track she appeared, looking cool and strong despite climbing 2,600 feet and covering 39 miles.

As she was gaining on the leaders I tried in vain to slow her pace, afraid that she would blow up well before the finish (she was still going too fast 20 miles later). The race was getting very interesting, the positions at Inverarnan being Dave Wallace (10:18), David Francis (10:26), Duncan Watson (10:38), Betty Hall (10:45), Tony Deall (11:25).

Glen Falloch shimmered in the heat, support teams were reluctant to interrupt their sunbathing and the competitors now began to suffer on the 1100 foot climb from Loch Lomond. Fortunately it was possible for a supporter to keep close and respond to special requests, however impolite. Memories were rekindled of the TV documentary of a recent run through Death Valley, USA because the runners were inexorably taking on a similar appearance.

A standing ovation greeted Betty at Tyndrum at 13:37 as spectators for the sheepdog trials became more interested in a much more rigorous trial going on in their midst. By now she had moved up to second, despite a pit stop for a change of shoes, because David Francis had blown above Crianlarich and Duncan was also going through a bad patch - "I'll get her later" was his recollection of this setback. (He closed the gap to a few yards at Auch but suffered as a consequence, losing more time at Bridge of Orchy and Victoria Bridge.)

At Bridge of Orchy (14:50) the situation was getting serious and alcohol for internal application was demanded. The anecdote of Betty "bevvying" went up and down the line, causing some concern to the leader who was only 37 minutes in front at that stage. The "easy" stretch along the road at Victoria Bridge had a debilitating affect on the lead runners and this was a common low point. My sympathies went to Duncan at this point, with one lady going away from him and another (Sylvia Watson) close behind, he apparently was having difficulty standing. The prospect of Rannoch Moor solo must have seemed very daunting. I was so concerned about Betty I sped around to Blackrock Cottage and immediately set off back down the track to meet her. I need not have worried because I did not go far before meeting her cresting the hill, concentrating still on running when the terrain permitted. I resolved to keep with her to the finish, only(!) 25 miles away and could not have done it without the availability of the impromptu support car driven by Anne MacDonald. Not only the ladies record but also the possibility of first place was now on the cards as I was convinced that Dave Wallace would "blow" before the finish.

We had a good line over the Devils Staircase and enjoyed superb views of old familiar climbs in Glencoe. Storm clouds were gathering in the West however and I was glad that we had plenty of light to the finish, being only 7:30pm at Kinlochleven.

At Kinlochleven the leader was going away from us but I was quite content that a steady pace would see us to Fort William in a respectable time. Sub 19 hours might have been possible but the twists and turns of the undulating Mamore track put paid to such ambitions. Despair was setting in when at last there was the trusty Anne to greet us with a bottle of Lucozade and the good news that we were only 10 minutes from Lundavra, the road-head.

The prospect of the switchback road to Fort William was too much for me so I gratefully jumped a ride and "supervised" that last stage. Years of mountain climbing had conditioned Betty to arrive at base just prior to "last orders", and this was no exception. At 10:43pm, 19 hours 43 minutes after leaving Milngavie, she cruised to the finish and a deservedly tumultuous welcome at the Nevis Bank Hotel.

It had been a long but enjoyable day rounded off with a stolen shower and a couple of pints of real beer. Of the 20 starters for this true marathon, 14 stalwarts completed the race, 9 in under 24 hours. Everybody, support teams included, were privileged to be part of an experience they will never forget and which would not have been possible without the hard work of Duncan Watson, the Nevis Bank Hotel and all associated helpers. Roll on next year and the prospect of including this event in the championship calendar!