

THE ORIGINAL CHALLENGE 1985

by Duncan Watson

1830 hours 7th May 1985

The phone rang.

“Hello, is that Bobby Shields?”

“Aye.”

“I hear you’ve done The West Highland Way in 19¼ hours.”

“Aye.”

“I’m Duncan from Lochaber. I’ve done it in just under twenty.”

“Oh, aye?”

“Fancy meeting me at Milngavie at 3 a.m. on the 22nd June and having a wee race up it?”

“Aye, okay.”

Simple. It was almost exactly like that, and the ex-two packs of cigs and ex-bottle a day whisky salesman, Duncan, was deadly serious. He reckoned that he could do it in under 18 and competition with Bobby would help him achieve it. Beating Bobby wasn’t really in his mind. Or was it? I mean, could he really compete?

Duncan’s love of the hills had brought about a change in habits. So much, in fact, that, escaping from the booze and the fags, he had started, at age 37 to enter, not just road marathons, globally, but hill races and, eventually, ultra races. He had run the WHW alone over two days, camping at Inverarnan (and taking on eight pints of Guinness at The Inn, purely for medicinal purposes!) in under 24 hours elapsed running time. That was 1981. In 1983, with superb back-up from family, he had done it in 19 hours 59 minutes, with rest-stops totalling less than fifteen minutes. Now aged 42, he believed that sub-18 was possible.

Bobby, a couple of years younger, was a past-winner of the Ben Nevis Race and still current record-holder of several arduous hill races. A quiet, unassuming, determined, superbly-fit bloke. What did this true champion think when he got the phone call?

“No, I didn’t think Dunc was a crank, but I hadn’t heard of him. He sounded very serious, so I went along with it and stepped up my training to over 120 miles a week.

Actually, the day before the challenge, my back-up team dropped out. I phoned Dunc and asked if he could help. Without hesitation, he suggested that I give my gear and food to his team and they would take care of me as well as him. He added that he was looking forward to our ‘get together’. Something in his tone suggested I had a real contest on my hands.”

The West Highland Way in 1985 was vastly different to today’s route for various reasons. The route had been established in 1980, but, unlike today, contained little in the way of consistent running surface.....no crushed rock surfaces.....no soft bark trail.....no flat, rolled path. The path on the North side of Conic Hill, for instance, wasn’t formed at all. A runner, or walker, could easily slip into this morass up to their waist. The added effort and extra time needed to negotiate this mess could (and did) deflate an aspiring WHW runner’s aspirations. The descent from Conic to

Balmaha was steep muddy and dangerous...no such thing as steps!

The East shore of Loch Lomond has been described as desperate for runners. In 1985, it was considerably worse, as there had been several recent landslides which created hundreds of yards of hard-to-negotiate mud, tree and boulder. Also, there were no neat boulder steps at Rob Roy's Cave, a mile or so north of Inversnaid, just a clutter of massive boulders neatly placed for ripping into knees and destabilising forward progress.

North of Inverarnan, both Bobby and Duncan recall slithering back down black mud-filled slopes, up to twenty feet high, on several occasions. At another point, north of Doune Bothy, the path was diverted uphill at least three hundred feet, due to flooding. The descent northwards from above Crianlarich, Bobby recalls being akin to ski-ing with no discernable track, just Somme-like mud.

Such was the erosion on the ascent from Bridge of Orchy over the hill to Inveroran (there were no trees planted then), that the pair had agreed at the start to take the tarmac road between the two points.

Other short-cuts taken in June 1985 were the tarmac road between Balmaha and Rowardennan, and the tarmac road between Lundavra and Fort William (longer and more ascent).

The total difference in distance is estimated at two miles, in ascent, maybe 500 feet(?).

Of course, such are the potential weather conditions on the WHW, where hypothermia one day can contrast with heat-exhaustion the next, that small mileage/height differences can count for little by comparison.

So, what happened at 0300 on 22nd June 1985?

Well, they shook hands and set off into the dark, without a word. Indeed, no words were spoken for many, many miles... and very few during the whole, long journey. They ran together most of the time, with small gaps quickly closed after one of them had a comfort stop, walking when gradient or quagmire underfoot dictated.

Duncan, somewhere up the East shore of Loch Lomond quipped (speaking at last) to Bobby that he (Bobby) was making a hero out of him. Was this Duncan's way of acknowledging Bobby's probable superiority over him in this ultimate challenge? It was time to ask Duncan.

"Deep, deep down, I knew I wouldn't give up easily, and then only if injured to my long-term, future detriment. Half deep down I thought that I could hang on to this guy, of whom it was said he never slowed to a walk, and better my own time for the 95 miles. Just below the surface, I was in awe of Bobby whose top-placings and records in races had me wondering who the heck I thought I was, effectively challenging him to something of which I had so little experience, particularly with regard to my previous body-wasting habits.

Around about King's House it appeared that we were both actually equally fatigued. Would the race really start now? We were 'way ahead of a 19 hour schedule. Did Bobby have the ability to pull gradually, heart-breakingly, away from me? We set off towards Altnafeadh with the wind and rain into our faces. I asked Bobby how he honestly felt, volunteering that I was beginning to feel real bad. Amazingly, my hero confessed to similar feelings of deterioration of physical, but not yet mental, abilities. The flesh was weak... the mind strong.

I reasoned that, if we were both feeling pretty bad, and that, if we wanted to make things easier for

both of us, we might consider a 'joint venture'. Instead of trying to out-psych one another, and tire ourselves out with direct competition, perhaps this joint effort would assist us both to, not only finish this, now damnable, event, but establish a record, superior to what one of us may do in beating the other. We shook hands, suitably, at the foot of The Devil's Staircase. Did it get easier? Don't be daft!

Halfway down into Kinlochleven, our spirits were raised by the sight of three more of my heroes (but not Bobby's, 'coz he had beaten them all in various hill races!), running up to meet us and give us succour. Ronnie (Cammie) Campbell, a 4th on the Ben Race, the elfin Roger Boswell, a 10th on the Ben, and Scottish Middle Weight contender Stevie McLeod, a 12th on the Ben. This really raised my game and there was that wonderful, if short, period of mild elation many WHW runners have felt at various stages of this long, mind and body-sapping run. As usual, it was short-lived.

Desperation crept in on leaving Kinlochleven. It's only 14 miles over to Fort William, but it feels like forever. Bobby would stumble on the rough, broken track. Then I'd fall. Getting up was hell! Maintaining a running movement was just possible scared to walk in case you couldn't start running again. Oh, and the time? We knew that sub 18 hours was on. Could we maintain forward movement at the same pace? 'You OK, Dunc?' croaked Bobby. 'Aye, just', I groaned back.

Then we were at Blarmafalach. We could see the summit of Ben Nevis above Fort William. The wind had dropped. Nothing could stop us. 18hours? Think so.

That mile-long, steep, downhill jog into Fort William was excruciating on over-used hips, ankles and all points between. Never again. ??

Then the crowd outside the Nevisbank Hotel, the radio interviews, the swift pints, the smiles, congratulations, the luxury...the stopping....oh, the stopping.

And the time.....17 hours 48 minutes 30 seconds."

Thanks, Bobby.

Aye, thanks, Dunc.

IMPORTANT NOTE:

Fancy long hours, sometimes alone, on a windswept hillside, with freezing rain?

Fancy battling with midges for up to 35 hours without a break?

Fancy no sleep, not a sausage, for up to 48 hours?

Fancy doing all the above maybe to be totally disappointed, yet come back and do the same next year, and the year after that.....?

Fancy a challenge greater than completing the WHW Race itself?

If so, become one of the greatest unsung heroes of all time....

Become a member of the back-up team for a West Highland Way runner!