

Grant Campbell 1998

A Canadian Perspective.

I first became aware of the West Highland Way Race through the fabulous web site I stumbled upon one cold, dreary December day in 1997. I skipped my run that day due to a typical Canadian winter storm and ended up surfing the net and checking some ultramarathon sites instead. As a Canadian of Scottish descent, I've always wanted to try to incorporate a run in Scotland with a visit to my homeland, and when I began reading Dario's web page, I knew I had found the one to try.

The web site was so well laid out, it was easy to find out a great deal about the course, previous races and what each runner would be in for. I sent off for an entry form to race director Jim Stewart, submitted it with the pertinent information and he was kind enough to let me attempt it. At that time I had run 73 ultras ranging from 50 km through 80 miles, but had only attempted one 100 miler and stopped at 50 miles.

My father lives in Rothesay, Bute and I hoped he would be able to assist me enroute. However he was planning on coming to Canada in June before the race date but I was fortunate to have two colleagues from the University of Guelph volunteer to act as my support crew. Dave Hindley and Barrie Lindsay are both of Scottish ancestry and jumped at the chance to see Scotland. The Canadian contingent was in place!

We left Toronto on June 12th and arrived in Glasgow the following day. This gave us a week to acclimatize and get over any jet lag before the race on the 20th. We picked the car we hired on June 16th and squeezed in a quick trip to Northern Ireland before the race. On Friday evening, the day before the run, we headed for the Milngavie station, all set for our adventure.

We arrived at Milngavie Station at 20:30hrs; we didn't want to be late for the start! After a pre race meal of fish and chips we attempted to have a nap in the car with limited success. About 1.00am on Saturday, runners and crews began drifting in and there was the usual pre race tension and excitement in the air. I managed to track down Dario Melaragni, with whom I had been corresponding by e-mail the past few months. It was great to finally meet the man who had provided me with so much information about the race. After registering and receiving my race number, (#1 by the way, certainly not to be confused with my finishing position. I thought it was a nice gesture by the race directors to give the first 3 numbers to the three North American entrants). Jim Stewart gave us our pre race instructions. Any thoughts of backing out at this point had vanished, as joined my fellow ultra runners and lined up in the dark waiting for the race to begin.

At 3.00am we were off heading into the darkness. I had planned to run a very conservative race and try not to let others get me going out too fast. My goal was simply to finish, this my first attempt, comfortably. Once I was more familiar with the course, perhaps I could come back another year and try for a faster time. Dave and Barrie were to meet me at the first mandatory checkpoint east of Drymen at 20.2km. They were there as promised waving their Canadian flag Dave was disgusted I was in last place. "Way to go Canada" he jeered through the haze of his cigar. "46th! Last Place!"

"Don't worry, Davey", I assured him "there's lots of race left!" The first 20 km was literally a pain in the ass for me as I constantly fiddled and adjusted my waist pack full of my required supplies. I couldn't get it right; it was bouncing around and was becoming annoying. I had to stop a number of times to adjust the straps. This slowed me down a bit. In retrospect, it was probably a good thing as it forced me to run at a sensible pace in those early miles.

The first major climb came near Balmaha over Conic Hill. It was a good steady climb with a spectacular panoramic view of the moorland. At this point there were about eight walking up the hill so we all had a chance to make introductions. I ran with John Lucas for a while on the descent into balmaha car park. My crew was there again and I had a quick bite to eat and proceeded on to the 2nd checkpoint at Rowardennan Woods. I joined up with Jim Robertson and another fellow at this

point and ran quite aways together. It was great for me to tap into the experience of the WHW veterans. The section from Rowardennan to Inverarnan is extremely rough, particularly north of Inversnaid. It was a long stretch from before you would see your crew and it was getting hot by then. Jim assured it was alright to drink from the burns that run down the hills."It might taste a bit peaty ; but it's alright to drink".

The terrain was very rocky along the shore of Loch Lomond. I caught up with Dario in this area and he was having some stomach problems, I ran with him for quite aways through Rob Roy Macgregor country. Dario was a walking map of the Way! Together we arrived at the Inversnaid Hotel at 55km and rested a bit beforw proceeding. The sun was beating down on all of us by now and it was taking its toll. I was fortunate to have experienced some hot, humid weather early in the year in Canada while I trained. It was extremely hot and humid in Canada in late May which is unusual. I'm sure that hot Canadian weather helped me as I didn't find the heat too oppressive when I ran the WHW.

Dario and I came in together at the 3rd checkpoint at Beinglas Farm at 65.1k. It was a long time since we had seen our crew; but there they were with food and beverage. They had to hike in a fair bit themselves; but as usual Dave and Barrie had everything I needed to reload and continue on my way.

For some reason, I don't have much recollection of the section between checkpoint 3 and 4 at Tyndrum. It was extremely hot by then and I was into a walk-run shuffle. I recall getting lost after I left Dario and went on my own. I was kicking myself for that since Dario knew where he was going. He was having a hard time and valiantly packed it in at Tyndrum. I met my crew in Tyndrum at 85.1km and it was a welcome relief to get some warm food and a cup of tea. I rested there for a short time after a change of clothes, socks and shoes and carried on to the Bridge of Orchy. I walked a great deal of that section but a was managing a good fast walk that was much more comfortable than a slow run. I laid down for about 10 minutes close to Bridge of Orchy and dozed off at the side of the trail. Luckily Garry Milne and another runner came along and opened the gate. I heard the gate squeak and it woke me up. Otherwise I may have slept the race away at the side of the road! As I gradually descended the trail into the Bridge of Orchy, I could see Dave jogging up to meet me, still smoking his cigar! They had just finished a pint in the Bridge of Orchy Hotel and didn't want to miss me when I arrived.

I checked in there at the 5th checkpoint (96km), Stan Milne had arrived there and was sporting badly blistered feet. He and his wife were walking up the hill on the other side of the bridge when I went by him. On his bandaged feet he inspired me to continue.

On I went towards Kingshouse. This was my most pressing concern; to arrive at Kingshouse before the midnight cutoff. I knew if I could make it there in time, I'd finish the race. I knew I could walk to Fort William by 2pm Sunday.

Trekking through the Rannoch Moor was psychologically tough. I found it a very desolate and eerie place. There were no sounds and at that point I was walking on my own. I imagined all sorts of ghostly images! But I knew I was coming to Glencoe and as a Campbell maybe I was getting bad vibes from thinking about that awful event in 1692.

It seemed to take forever to get to Kingshouse. I could see the lights off in the distance but it seemed never to arrive. I was drained by the time I finally arrived at Kingshouse with 15 minutes to spare! The midges were horrible there; they didn't seem too bad until then. I was a bit incoherent when I arrived and Dave and Barrie were concerned. We were at 115k and I was bonking a wee bit. I sat in the car with the heater going to warm up and gingerly nibbled on some macaroni and cheese. Dave offered me a cup of hot tea with lots of sugar. I soon came around; we had the Devil's Staircase just ahead and I wanted to be warm and I wanted to be warm and well nourished. Dave and Barrie started panicking at this point; which one of them would accompany me over the Staircase?! Neither was too keen on the prospect. luckily for them, and for me too, Ben Adam from Irvine arrived at the

checkpoint around the same time as I did. After we were into dry clothes, we teamed up and headed for Kinlochleven.

Everyone had warned us about the Devil's Staircase. The weather could change at the drop of a hat. I really didn't appreciate that until we were going over it. Off in the distance you could see the ominous sheet lightning silhouetting the mountains, particularly Buachaille Etive Mor. We arrived at the Staircase in the dark and started up. It seemed to zig-zag forever and I wondered if we would ever reach the top. We both had headlamps; mine wasn't working too well so I was relying more on Ben's. Dario had told me about the Green Man some people would see while climbing the Staircase. I was disappointed I didn't see him. As we approached the top, the wind really picked up and the rain had begun. Torrential rain and hail ensued, interspersed with lightning lighting the whole area. I took quick snapshots with my eyes to take advantage of the light to see where we were and where we were supposed to be headed.

At this point the rain was seeping through my so called waterproof suit and I was beginning to cool down. I was worried about getting hypothermic and figured I might as well keep moving. It wouldn't do me much good staying up there. Despite being soaked, I gradually warmed up and felt better and I knew then I could finish the course. Ben and I came to the road to Kinlochleven and got a little confused. We were about 1km from Kinlochleven when we thought we were heading the wrong way. Checking the map, we backtracked and headed back 3km. We ran into the American runners who at that point were looking pretty rough. I gave them my emergency blanket to warm themselves up as Ben and I headed back to get on course. After realising that we were on the right track the first time, we headed back. It was easy to get disoriented in the thick fog and rain. We got to do an extra 6km! As we walked down into Kinlochleven, we saw Jim Stewart coming towards us; we were elated to see him and we all walked into Checkpoint 7 at Kinlochleven (129.5km). The Americans were knackered and packed it in there. It was 6am on Sunday and only 23km to go. I told them they could make it; just walk the rest of the way. The man (Steve Jones) said he had enough and couldn't finish it; the American woman (Erica Clarkson) looked like she could have gone on, but she stopped too..

I had 8 hours left to get to Fort William and although I was down to more of a survival shuffle, I knew I could do it. The scenery into Fort William was spectacular and as Ben and I trudged along I began experiencing some hallucinations. I had never experienced this in an ultra before although many of my running friends in Canada had during the course of doing a 100 miler. I began to see people standing beside me on the trail. White stones on the path turned into lambs that I had to step over. I knew I needed a sugar fix (or a Lobotomy!). I yelled to Ben that I was seeing things and he was starting to wonder about me. I was beginning to trail behind him; but he kept waiting for me to catch up. He told me we had been together since Kingshouse so we'd finish together. He kept encouraging me for which I will always be grateful. Then he started hallucinating; we'd take turns, one with some sense left, one not. We got each other through that last section.

It was a welcome sight to finally gaze upon Ben Nevis. We hiked through the forest and down into Fort William for the final stretch. We walked that entire stretch from Kinlochleven; we had nothing left to run.

As the Leisure Centre beckoned, we summoned our collective strength and jogged across the finish line. We had done it! Just under 33 hours but we did what we came to Scotland to do. Ben got me through that stretch from Kingshouse and wouldn't leave me and got me to Fort William. I'll never forget that experience going over the Devil's Staircase in some of the fiercest lightning I had ever seen. The whole race has so many incredible memories for me that I will never forget. We met so many great people and new friends who made us all feel so at home. I extend my heartfelt thanks to you all. Dave and Barry did a fabulous job as my support crew. It was their first encounter with ultramarathon running and I commend them both.

My thanks also to Jim Stewart and Alan Derrick for taking on the huge responsibility of organising the race. I would love to come back and try again some day.

It was a trip of a lifetime to go to home of my ancestors and walk on the paths and trails they would have walked on. I always felt a connection to the Highlands through stories told to me by my grandparents, but travelling through the Highlands on foot brought me closer than anything to knowing that even though I was born in Canada, I'm still a Scot and this was the land I came from.

"From the lone sheiling of the misty island,
Mountains divide us and the waste of seas,
Yet still the blood is strong, the heart is Highland,
We in dreams behold the Hebrides."

From the Canadian Boatsong.

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