

Jamie Thin

Jamie Thin's account of the race in the year 2000
West Highland Way Race 2000

"Ah, to be s'ure I'll help you out... where do I meet you?

Glen Coe

... Glen Coe .. where's that??

Donal - the mad Dubliner.

Last time I had left Milngavie, it had taken me 5 days to walk to Fort William, this time the plan was to run there in a oner.

As ever I was still packing and making butties at 10pm the night before, then snatched 3 hours kip before waking at 1am to get across to the start.

Only 3 hours sleep before a 24hr race was not a good plan - but after a certain point you're going to be tired anyway so it doesn't really matter if you start tired!!

The race rules state you need to provide your own support - Joanne was not sold on the idea of driving me to the start at 3am with a baby and toddler in tow - so 2 days before, I rounded up an unlikely band of helpers with a bit of arm-twisting - Aidrian, Kevin and Donal.

Aidrian drove me through an empty Glasgow - with a hundred and one red lights and one or two late-night revellers returning from the clubs.

We were cutting it a bit fine, and then took a few wrong turns. The start of the way is an unlikely looking spot - a monolithic needle of stone set in a suburban shopping precinct! I found this in the dark ... but still no runners and at 2.55am no locals to ask for directions. Panic began to set in ... if I missed the start it was going to be a very lonely 95 miles!

At this point I wished I had read the race instructions a bit closer.

I jumped back into the car, we turned a few corners and came to the railway station. Of course ... that's where the race started!

We arrived just as the cheer went up and the runners left the lights of the station and set off through a darkened under-pass. First rule of any race ... find out where the race starts beforehand!

I jumped out - asked Aidrian to register for me, changed into shorts and trainers and a couple of minutes later set off in hot pursuit of the rest of the field. Just as I ran through the under-pass from the railway station, I met Kevin who with impeccable timing shepherded me in the right direction.

It was dark in the trees and I was greatly relieved when I caught up with another runner!

Missing the start was probably my best race strategy - there was a big adrenaline rush which woke me with a kick, and then there was no temptation to go with the early pace of the front runners. By the time I had caught up the main group, I was out-of-breath from a fast start and more than happy to fall in with the steady pace of the race veterans - a couple of older runners who between them had run the race 16 times!

They had plenty of advice for a fresh-faced novice like me and for once I listened. Run the flat and downhill, walk the uphill sections ... "there are plenty more hills to come, laddie"

It was the big unknown ... 95 miles over trails and rough tracks. Milngavie, Mugdock, Loch Lomond side, Crianlarich, Bridge of Orchy, Inveroran, Glen Coe, the Devil's staircase, Kinlochleven, Glen Nevis and Fort William.

My training had involved cycling 3 miles to work and back each day (30 miles on the bike a week) and then an average running mileage of about 5 or 10 miles a week. Hardly enough for the Pentland skyline, let alone 95 miles. Partly this was an experiment - how much training was really necessary?

And if truth be told, there hadn't been time in the day, with one daughter in plaster for 2 months after an operation on her leg, and then a new baby born 8 weeks before race day.

I had entered the race in February after struggling round the Carnethy 5, feeling six miles was far enough.

A long challenge once a year is good for the soul. The previous year it had been Tranter's round of the Glen Nevis hills, but we had bailed out when we were blown off the tops and had then watched a sheep drown in a swollen burn just as we prepared to wade across ourselves.

The West Highland Way race had been a germ of an idea ever since I had walked the way with my french pal Paul (Paul is now an accomplished landscape painter living in Strasbourg, and my memories are of camping on the banks of Loch Lomond with sunlight flooding through the trees). But it was watching the end of the race in Fort William last year, and thinking f**k these runners have run all the way from Glasgow and they're still smiling that inspired me to have a go.

After an hour of running, the early dawn light was beginning to seep through the trees. Head-torches were switched off and as we came out of the trees, we reached the first open stretch of good running through moorland. Before me swept the path all the way to the highlands. I was feeling good. We were all relaxed and I chatted and joked to the other runners as the relief of being off and away sunk in. These first 26 miles to Rowardennan were going to be fun. The wind picked up over Conic Hill, but back in the woods by the loch it was surprisingly close and humid.

Past Rowardennan, three of us fell into a steady pace on the forest tracks and came across the familiar figure of Angela Mudge running in the other direction who gave us a shout.

Half the battle was eating and drinking enough as the day progressed. I have vague childhood memories of my Grandad's tales of the war, forced marches and heat exhaustion in the hills of Burma as he fled the advance of the Japanese army. Rangoon is a long way from Milngavie and heat exhaustion wasn't likely in the west of Scotland - but then again drinking about a litre of water every couple of hours proved harder than I thought!

When you sign up for the race you have to undertake to be self-sufficient and provide your own support. Aidrian - an old pal from North Wales - had been staying with us the night before and innocently admitted that his next stop was

Fort William. I managed to persuade him to take a circuitous route which involved driving me to Milngavie for the 3am start the next day and then following me north. Thereafter - at every road crossing Aidrian was there with some food and water and a few words of encouragement to keep me going. By the time we got to Loch Lomond, the midges were appearing and Aidrian's task of helping me out was turning into a battle against a cloud of midges who stalked all the waiting supporters.

Still as one of the few people who profit from the midge industry (with my work hat on, we publish the bestselling book on the Scottish midge!) I can now take some consolation from the biting midge. For every ferocious midge - there is always the chance that a few more tourists will be driven to distraction and be impelled to seek out their nearest bookshop to buy the "Midges in Scotland".

The day wore on. The great thing about the West Highland Way race is that you are never moving fast so there is plenty of time for talk and there is a natural tendency to stick together.

By about the 48 mile mark the legs were getting tired and I had fallen in with an older runner, John, who was keeping me going though a bad patch with a bit of banter. As we battled up a rough farm track above Crianlarich, John gave out saying this was just the spot you were likely to go arse over tit - true to his word within half a mile we had both lost our footing and had gathered a few more scars from the boulders. I had taken a good bite out of my knee and began to stiffen up - but once the pain eased off, it gave me renewed confidence and a second wind, thinking it can only get easier now - over half way there.

Little did I know that the first 50 miles were just the warm up. But while the legs were getting ragged, the scenery was growing more rugged - and the light was fantastic as sunshine broke out across the Blackmount and Rannoch moor with a light breeze on our backs.

Past the Kingshouse, the race rules dictate a support runner over the Devil's staircase to Kinlochleven - this was where Donal came in. Donal was game for anything - he was built like a lock-forward and even turned up in his baggy shorts and rugby top. He had never been to the highlands before and after finishing the New York marathon last year, he had sworn he was never running another step. His big mistake was working alongside my mate Mick who had twisted Donal's arm - Jamie needs you! So 6pm on Saturday 17th June found Donal setting off from the Kingshouse on the way to Fort William with Jamie in tow.

Donal's legs must have been the only bare flesh in the whole of Glen Coe - everyone else was wrapped-up head to toe. The midges didn't waste any time and Donal's first experience of the highland midge was not going to be forgotten! (he was still showing off his midge bites to his workmates a few days later!)

Darkness began to fall as we climbed out of Kinlochleven and we caught up with another runner Jim. The three of us kept together after that - and it was Donal's dublin drawl that kept Jim and I awake through the wee small hours until at last we were descending into Glen Nevis and we knew that even if we had to crawl the last mile - we were going to make it to Fort William.

Aidrian was there to greet us at the end - and it was a great feeling to finish. In the end it had been a real team effort and I would never have made it without the help and support of friends - Aidrian, Kevin and Donal.

All that was left to do was crash out for a few hours on the floor of the local climbing wall and then hunt out a big Sunday morning fry-up in town.

Aidrian was the real star of the show. Paralysed from the waist down in a climbing accident three years ago - it didn't stop him getting around. We had joked at the "Alpine start" on the Saturday morning as he drove me to Glasgow in his specially adapted car - all hand controls - and he was expert at sliding out of his car and into his wheels or onto his hand powered tricycle for rougher terrain.

The West Highland Way race is a contrived challenge for those fool enough to add a few more hurdles to daily life, but not to be missed if you have a spare 24 hours on your hands!

For me it was also a bit of therapy, with two daughters diagnosed with a metabolic bone disorder, there is that strange feeling of helplessness, waiting for time to take its toll or for science and medicine to play catch up.

You become a spectator in the big game of life. Not easy if you're used to taking your own life in your hands and doing as you please.

But Aidrian is an inspiration - you can't guess what twists and turns life will take, but life is what you make it.

(Jamie was raising money for 2 charities who fund ground-breaking research into childhood bone disorders - Arthritis Research Campaign and CLIMB -Children Living with Inherited MetaBolic disease - www.climb.org.uk - he raised over £1000.)

Race Results 17th June 2000 (95 miles)

Posn Name Club

1 Wim Epskamp Netherlands 16:26:50 (new record)

2 Kate Jenkins Carnethy 17:37:48 (new record)

3 Dave Wallace Harmeny/Balerno 18:29:11

15= Jim Haig Fife AC 24:34:11

15= Jamie Thin Carnethy/Edinburgh 24:34:11

(32 finishers out of 42 starters)

Support team - Kevin Canavan (early hours) and Aidrian Disney (food maestro) and Donal (the mad Dubliner)

Best bit of kit - Camelbak water bottle with a drinking tube

Food - lots of honey butties, bananas, biscuits, and tins of rice pudding and sausage and beans.

Tips - Eat early and often, gluttony definitely pays on the long races!