

Joe Holden
WEST HIGHLAND WAY RACE 1995

Just Another Training Run

Yes, the theory behind that statement above was to turn more than a few heads in the coming months leading up to the race itself. That cliché is used more often than most fell runners realise, especially at the start of a race when you are probably not feeling 100% and then out come the classic proverbs, I'll treat it like J.A.T.R.

Well, this was exactly the philosophy Alan Graham and myself felt was needed when we both sent our entry forms away in the January of 1995.

At the time we felt that the race was optional, as having already both completed the Bob Graham Round down in the Lake District the previous year, and also taken part on numerous occasions in the Scottish Island Peaks Race and the K.I.M.M, our CV was quite healthy and I intimated that we should just "get it out of the way".

At the time my own thoughts about the W.H.W. was that it is a 96 mile low level course/route with little climb involved, which could quite possibly turn out to be (from a fell running point of view) an uninteresting experience. Any way, with this in mind and the prospects of a great adventure, and to hopefully eliminate any chance of a catastrophe, our strategy was planned on two points.

One, to run as a team, unless one had to withdraw through injury and two, to treat the race as yes, you've guessed it, J.A.T.R. As far as the training went, we more or less carried on as in previous years, with probably two good runs at the weekend, if not racing that is. I personally didn't feel the need to push myself into the 14 - 16 hours per week training as I know does happen, and my average over the 6 or so months before the race was about 7 hours a week. I did 13 races in that period with the Speyside Way 50km race, Scottish Island Peaks Race and the Bens of Jura hill race, all done within the last eight weeks before the W.H.W. Also on a number of occasions I had full days on the hills walking with my wife Alison, which in my opinion is equally as good (without the stress) as a 3 or 4 hour run. Before we move on, I must point out that Alan Graham had done less training and racing than myself leading up to the race, and with this in mind and not wanting to put ourselves under any pressure, the emphasis was on our pre-race strategy. We also split the overall route into sections which would vary from anything between 3 miles and 10 miles depending on where our support would meet up with us. This in itself gave us smaller targets to aim for instead of being focused on the overall 96 miles distance, and if we were fortunate enough to make Fort Bill and complete the race, it would be excellent. If on the other hand we managed it in under 24 hours, well, that would be an magnificent bonus.

All this might seem trivial to some people, but ultras are about mental attitudes. Get yourself into the right frame of mind then hopefully your physical side should follow along quite contented. It's a well know consensus that two thirds of ultras are a mental thing with one third being the physical side.

The other thing that's of equal importance is to have good reliable support, to be at a pre-select position in plenty of time so as to sort out whatever is necessary for the incoming runners, thus limiting stop time to a minimum.

Alan and I were fortunate to have four very enthusiastic athletes to accompany us on this J.A.T.R. Joan and Donald McLean (Lomond Hill Runners) were to take us over to Milngavie a few hours before the start, and look after us up to and including our break at the Rowardennan checkpoint. Helene Diamantedes, Adrian Davis and Ben the dog (Fife AC) would hopefully be at Inveranan for our arrival, and then support us up to Kinlochleven where Joan and Donald would make their return to support us after going to a function way back in Kirkcaldy. That's what I call enthusiasm and it's probably these four people that gave us the inspiration to perform beyond all expectations.

The W.H.W. race begins at the Milngavie railway station (about 7 miles north of central Glasgow) at 3am, usually on the weekend around the time of the summer solstice. It was not necessary to leave Fife until

about midnight, as this would give us plenty of time to get over to the start for registration and get our kit and food sorted out for the forthcoming challenge. At one thirty we arrived at a large car park outside the station and already it was a hive of activity – groups of fit looking folk were huddled round vehicles, ranging from small cars to large campers, eating and re-packing gear. The station ticket office was the nerve centre of operations and Alan intimated that he was tempted to save a lot of pain by buying a ticket for Fort Bill! After checking in, we chatted to the other competitors and did our best to wrinkle out any advice about the route.

Gathering around on the start line the signs for the day looked quite ominous with an overcast sky and light rain coming down, but smack on 3am, the organiser, Jim Stewart sent seventy hardy souls away on this well established route. Which incidentally, was opened in 1980 to become Scotland's first official long-distance footpath. An incongruous sprint down the shopping precinct led into a narrow path leading through the park. There was a moment of pure farce as we reached a split in the path and somebody shouted that the leaders had gone the wrong way, the way marker he was pointing to had been turned and was pointing back to the start! The rain was by now torrential and we were running through ankle deep puddles anxiously wondering what lay ahead.

The first 12 miles to Drymen is relatively flat. Excellent paths take you along the Allander Water and through the beautiful parklands and woodlands of Mugdock County Park, and then an old coach road continues past Craigallian and Carbeth lochs to reach more open country at the B821.

By now the drizzle was ebbing and the brightness of the dawn was beginning to break through with some clear sky on the horizon. With the initial nerves over we soon settled into a routine and we could start to enjoy ourselves. Every four or five miles we reached a road where Joan and Donald provided five star support ranging from a quick drink to a longer break for food. Some of the runners we chatted to painted an alarming picture of the section up Loch Lomond – it sounded like machetes would be needed to hack our way through.

There are good views from here across Strath Blane to the Campsie Fells with shapely Dumgoyne (1402') prominent. Farm paths skirt the tree clad lumps of Dumgoyach Hill into green and gentle Strath Blane where the route takes to the disused line of the old Blane Valley Railway, this line is muddy in places but continues to provide easy going for the next 4 miles to Gartness, and then a further two miles of back road brings you to the village of Drymen (12 mile mark).

After a short break the route climbs through Garadhbhan Forest on good forest tracks to reach a crossroads where there are two alternative ways forward. The normal race route goes straight on over multi topped Conic Hill (1175') to give a first taste of the Highlands.

We were 20 miles into the race and it was great to see our first real hill and I was tempted to stretch my legs a bit. Unfortunately I did not convey my thoughts to Alan and off I went. Surprised at this, Alan asked one of the runners he passed for suggestions on how to slow me down. "Kick him in the balls" came the reply. So much for camaraderie! The well made path climbs around the north side of the hill and gives wonderful views in all directions, especially the view of one of the most beautiful lochs in Scotland, Loch Lomond, with its many islands spread out before you. These hump-backed islands represent a continuation of Conic Hill and mark the line of the Highland Boundary Fault, which separates the highlands from the lowlands. The descent of Conic Hill is steep and concentration is essential, especially on the rocky path, but once off the hill it's quite an easy run in along the forest tracks down into Balmaha. As Alan and I arrived at the car park where our support would be, the aroma of bacon and sausage being cooked by other support teams was tantalising, but we stuck to our diet of custard and rice with bananas and apricots as well as some savouries thrown in.

Balmaha up to Rowardennan is a pleasant section which follows the eastern shore of Loch Lomond. The way avoids the road for the most part by taking to the woods and shore line on its left, although never far from the road, the path passes through some beautiful scenery like penetrating dense woodland, running beside lapping waters of the loch or climbing over waterside crags. Above Rowardennan (25 mile mark) towers the popular summit of Ben Lomond (3195'), it was good to see our support team (Joan

and Donald) again and it is here that we bid them goodbye as they were returning to Kirkcaldy for their function. Hopefully they would rejoin us later in the evening.

By now some five hours had past since the race started and both Alan and I were doing quite well and really getting into the swing of things without any problems to contend with. However the next section from Rowardennan along the eastside of Loch Lomond into Glen Falloch is generally recognised as having the toughest terrain of the whole route. The path hugs the lochside but is rarely level as it negotiates a variety of obstacles such as lochside crags, tree stumps, roots, boulders and streams, at one point there is even a chain handrail for security. It's extremely rough, boggy and tiresome, and after rain it is awash with ankle grabbing mud. On the plus side there are some fine lochside spots and some interesting crags and oak woodland scenery, but the tiresome going can detract from all of this unless you are mentally prepared for it.

The worst sections are from Ptarmigan Lodge to Rowchoish Bothy, some three miles long and from Inversnaid to Doune Bothy at roughly four miles long. The first of these sections can be avoided by an excellent forest track that runs parallel to the way higher up the hillside. By taking this track in the race the only item of real interest that you would miss is Rob Roy's prison - a lochside crag on whose ledges Rob is said to have kept his prisoners. From Rowchoish Bothy it's a further three miles to Inversnaid where there is a hotel and a fine waterfall, and then the second very rough section begins. Near the start of this section the route passes an impressive rock face and negotiates a massive rock fall at its foot, where Rob Roy's cave lies among the fallen boulders. Also keep a lookout for the wild goats that frequent this part of the route. Beyond Doune Bothy the going eases as the path climbs away from the loch and then descends to Beinglas Farm in Glen Falloch. Then there is a good track before the route again becomes rough and often muddy as it runs besides the banks of the river Falloch along to Derrydarroch Farm.

Fortunately, this year's race was preceded by two to three weeks of fine weather, which made the conditions under foot quite good except for the obstacles. But all the same it was one hard slog and a delight to know that we were not far from Inverarnan (39 miles) by the sound of Ben's bark. This also confirmed to us that Helene and Adrian had taken up the support role from Joan and Donald, and were running down from Inverarnan to meet us. Pleasant woodlands and river scenery including the Falls of Falloch eased the going. It was here that we learned there were only four runners ahead of us. That news gave us both a superb boost and got the adrenaline flowing once again.

From Derrydarroch Farm the route crosses the river and continues along a renovated path directly below the A82 to reach Carmyle Cottages. From here the path crosses under the A82 and climbs to join a track that once formed part of Cauldfields military road from Glasgow to Fort Bill. The track rises gently across the hillside and when it ends, an excellent path continues to a junction from where a branch path descends down to Crainlarich. The race route goes left of the junction and crosses into Glen Dochart by passing Crainlarich.

For the first time since Conic Hill it becomes a true hill path climbing to a high point of nearly 1000' on the shoulder of Kirk Craigs. This point is exactly halfway along the race route and is a major turning point. The great North-South trench of Loch Lomond and Glen Falloch that has brought us this far is now left behind for wilder and more mountainous country. The path descends through the trees into Glen Dochart and crosses the A82 to join a tarmac road leading to the ruins of St. Fillans Chapel. From here a farm track leads onwards to re-cross the A82 further along and then becomes a narrow, often muddy riverside path up to Tyndrum (52 miles). It was here that Helene offered us both a leg massage to relieve the cramps as we sat down, and I can assure you there wasn't too much hesitation.

It had been a good ten hours since we left Milngavie, and still we were both in good spirits with no noticeable problems to mention. From Tyndrum, we were joined by Helene on this next section to Bridge of Orchy. It was enjoyable to have a fresh face about as by now all the runners were well and truly spread out and we felt a twinge of isolation with all this beautiful scenery to enjoy. The route itself follows the old public road, which was closed in 1931; a surface of rounded cobbles compacted through years of usage. Nowadays most of the road has reverted to a rough track. The route crosses a low pass and skirts the

foot of shapely Beinn Dorain (3523') whose conical summit towers overhead.

At Bridge of Orchy (59 miles), the old road is abandoned for a couple of miles to follow Caulfields route across the shoulder of Mam Carrigh and on to Inveroran (Victoria Bridge). "Sorry Alan", but it was on this section that he was almost caught with his pants down. We had just left our support and were ascending on a narrow trail through a small forest leading up to Mam Carrigh when Alan decided he needed to make an over delayed withdrawal from his bowels. Unknown to us, Helene had decided to do a fast run up and over this short section to Inveroran (Victoria Bridge). As I glanced back to see if Alan was back on the way, Helene appeared lower down the trail coming our way. Gesticulating madly to warn her of the situation and just as she was approaching to where he had left the trail, Alan suddenly re-emerged. Well, the look on both their faces was a picture of disbelief and horror.

Up to this point the weather had been excellent with high cloud and a slight southerly breeze, but things were about to change dramatically once we started to skirt the Blackmount range from Victoria Bridge and onto the edge of Rannoch Moor. Adrian and Ben accompanied us for this 10 mile or so section and it was not long before the gathering storm clouds above the Blackmount released their anger on us all. The wind increased dramatically and the rain was driving horizontally, but to our advantage it was still coming in from the south and therefore pushing us nicely along the old public road. In some places the line of the road corresponds with Cauldfields military road, but for much of the way Cauldfields road runs higher up the hillside and is much overgrown.

Keeping to the old public road the route climbs gently to the brow of a hill, and then descends past Lochan Mhic Pheadair Ruaidhe and on to Ba Bridge at the entrance to Corrie Ba. As we approached Ba Bridge with its magnificent backdrop of the Blackmount hills, Ben just about gave an unsuspecting group of hill walkers ahead of us a heart attack by rocketing past at top speed. Corrie Ba is an enormous bowl surrounded by fine mountains and is reputed to be the largest corrie in the Highlands. On the north side of the corrie the pointed shoulder of Clach Leathad (Clachlet) looks particularly impressive. Climbing out of the far side of the corrie the route reaches a high point where the Orchy and Blackmount mountains are left behind for new horizons. To the right now is the vast expanse of Rannoch Moor while ahead lies the entrance to Glen Coe guarded by Buachaille Etive Mor (Big Shepherd of Etive) at 3352' - the great rock pyramid that is one of Scotland's premier rock-climbing sites.

As we descended to Blackrock Cottage at the foot of the White Corries with the wind and rain still howling, seeing the Kingshouse Hotel (72 miles) in the distance re-kindled our spirits again knowing that Helene would be there with food and dry clothes etc. Adrian went ahead at a pace that showed up how slowly we were really going now. Cold, wet and miserable we arrived at Kingshouse to find even the marshals had disappeared indoors. Sheltering under the car boot we managed to change into dry clothes and Adrian generously lent his Buffalo to Alan – a real lifesaver. It's mandatory now that all runners must carry the relevant map and compass from Kingshouse to the finish at Fort Bill, and your kit is checked before being allowed to proceed.

The route now runs west of the hotel and keeps close to the main road as far as the houses at Altnafeadh and then leaves Glen Coe to zig-zag up one of the most famous section of the whole route - the Devil's Staircase. This rough (850') ascent was once the steepest section of Cauldfields road but it's not as difficult a climb as its name implies and the summit, the highest point on the route, is soon gained. By now the weather was calm with the clouds breaking up and the early evening sun breaking through. The view from the summit is perhaps the best of the whole route, as far to the north is spread before you the whole Mamore Range and if the weather is fine, Ben Nevis itself - the roof of Britain. The descent of the northern side of the Devil's Staircase takes you right back down to sea level at Kinlochleven (80 miles). It's a long, steep tiring descent into a grassy corrie at first, then contouring across the hillside to join a steep track that comes down from the Blackwater Reservoir.

It was here at Kinlochleven that Joan and Donald were meant to re-join the crusade after their sojourn in Kirkcaldy, but Alan and I had messed things up by having such a wonderful time that we forgot the schedule, and arrived an hour or so ahead of our predicted time. Luckily, Helene and Adrian unselfishly said they would support us until Joan and Donald caught up with us. Anyway, after a quick fix to our feet

(thanks once again Helene) and some more food we were both fighting fit again to tackle the last 16 miles or so to the finish at Fort Bill. Getting underway having totally seized up must have been a comical sight, working up to a geriatric shuffle the imminent 1000' climb up to the pass was a excuse to speed up to a walk. The path leaves the road opposite the school on the north side of town, and climbs very steeply through woods to re-join Cauldfields military road, which comes in as a rough track from Mamore Lodge. Once up onto this track it continues north-westwards through the great grassy trough of the Lairig Mor (Big Pass) on the south side of the Mamores. As you approach the summit of the Lairig, views of the Mamore tops and connecting ridges become increasingly spectacular, especially the backward view of Stob Ban (White Mountain, 3080') whose sparkling, gleaming quartz summit is a truly magnificent mountain prospect.

Beyond the summit of the pass, one last rise around the shoulder of the most westerly Mamore heralds the end of the Lairig Mor and the start of the last section of the WHW. The track then descends through a wood to reach the end of minor road at Blar a Chaorann that comes up from Fort Bill, and it was here to our surprise and probably to Helene and Adrian's relief that Joan and Donald managed to catch up with us all. Needless to say they were both delighted at our progress and amazed to find us still in a buoyant mood. As I mentioned earlier in this report, with support like ours you could not help but perform with vigour and enthusiasm, and when all is said and done it was actually an adventure for the six of us and not just two. After another quick fix to our feet and as darkness fell, with a little bit of sorrow we said our goodbyes to Helene, Adrian and Ben and thanked them very much for there patience and wished them a safe journey back to the Kingdom.

Alan and I now headed into the wooded valley of the Allt nan Gleannan, (hotly pursued by Donald screaming at us about forgetting our head torches - Thanks Donald). Which eventually crosses the low ridge at the head of the valley that leads the route into Glen Nevis and the finish of the race we had started some nineteen hours before. This section used to be very muddy but has been much improved and now carries an excellent well-drained path, a great improvement under foot after the rough military road. Once the ridge at the head of the valley of the Allt nan Gleannan is cleared, the immense (even in twilight) convex slopes of the south face of Ben Nevis dominates the horizon.

All that remains of the route is a final descent through the woods into Glen Nevis. The descent begins on a staircase like path over tree roots, but soon a forest track is reached and the remainder of the route is straight forward, following the track to the roadside just north of the visitors' centre. The last mile or so was sheer ecstasy with Joan and Donald driving alongside us shouting encouragement, it felt as if we were floating along and the feeling one felt on approaching the finish at the Sports Centre in Fort Bill (96 miles) was totally unprecedented.

At the start of the crusade it was all about doing the route and hopefully completing it, then maybe a wee celebration if we manage it in under 24 hours, but to finish joint 4th in 21hrs 32mins was way beyond our secret desires. It was no wonder that Joan and Donald were hopping about quite demented as Alan and I approached the finish, holding hands held high with the widest grin you have ever seen.

GREAT WEEKEND

Many, many thanks to all involved in this experience and big hugs and kisses for our wives who allowed us parole for the weekend - cheers girls. Also a big thanks to my partner in crime Alan for keeping me under control at the right moments and making it as enjoyable as possible - cheers mate.

My assumption at the start of this document that the W.H.W. could have been an "uninteresting experience" was way off the mark, and I fully retract that suggestion. After all this is **SCOTLAND**.

EPILOUGE

My pleasure did not last long after we had crossed the line, for within a few moments I was requested to give a blood sample for some research work being carried out by a doctor from Cambridge University

(just as well I refused that pint of Guinness at Kinlochleven). I had volunteered a few months previously to be one of their guinea pigs, which did not seem a big deal at the time, but once the needle was in my arm and the blood was being drawn out the overwhelming feeling of your body shrinking was truly overpowering. (see photo). The sensation of the room turning was quickly extinguished when a flash of white illuminated the area and then I knew my worst fears had been realised. (Thank you Donald). A second sample was taken one hour later for comparison, which was quite mundane. After all this it was over to Alan's friend Donnie's house to spend the rest of the night or what was left of it and into the comfort of a bed. I don't think any of us slept that well and both Alan and I were up quite early to stretch the legs and anything else that hurt. As Alan nipped down to the local shop for some fry up material, I went for a short walk up the tracks at the back of the house towards Cow Hill and did some more stretching before breakfast, which was magnificent. Well done Alan.

Around midday we all gathered down at the Nevis Bank Hotel for the prize giving and of course the long awaited re-hydration. It was also here that we were told that Don Ritchie (3rd overall) had just been awarded the M.B.E. in the Queen's Birthday Honours List for services to athletics. A well deserved accolade to one of the most unassuming people you could wish to meet. With the formalities complete and our goodbyes said, it was homeward bound and time to reflect on another superb adventure which would not have been possible without are priceless comrades - Joan, Helene, Donald, Adrian, and not forgetting Ben. Cheers Guys.

Best wishes to one and all
Yours in sport
Joe Holden
Fife AC