

John Dennison 1988

AT KINLOCHLEVEN I KNELT DOWN AND WEPT

(Report on the 1988 West Highland Way Race by John Dennison)

Most of us arriving at Milngavie Station for the 3a.m. start were already in an advanced state of nervous and physical exhaustion. For those without support teams, transport to the start had been a big worry. And would there be a car to take a change of clothing to the finish? The forecast was for a hot day - but what to wear at the start? Then there were the feeding arrangements to be planned. Sylvia Watson had just cycled the entire route to check up on local supplies of Ambrosia Creamed Rice. Jim Hall was in such a daze (whether from exhaustion or illicit substances I am not sure) he fell over the traffic island in the station car park and needed first aid treatment!

At the start, all eyes were on Duncan Watson, who was the only one of us to have run the Race before (he shares the course record with Bobby Shields). Duncan set a cautious 12-minute mile pace. Few of us knew how to run that slowly, so we bounced up and down on the spot, stopping to a shoe lace here or adjust a bum-bag there - anything to avoid taking the lead. This continued until we reached the first gate. Nigel Rose went through first and was totally unprepared for the position he now found himself in with the pack behind him. He panicked and bolted off down the track. Within seconds the gate was off its hinges and we were chasing him. We had a race.

At Drymen the field was well strung out. Because of an early start and protracted toilet stop I had no idea how many people had passed me; but I sensed I must be at the back because every time I reached a checkpoint Bobby Shields would get back into his van and drive on. Bobby had been quietly observing our progress from different points along the route, but now I imagined I was being scrutinised more closely. True, I was unsupported at this stage, but did I really look such a duffer? I resolved to improve my position at the expense of some of the ladies in the Race. I knew Kay Dodson was only just ahead, and then there was that other woman who had gone off too soon - Betty Hall. I entered Garadhban Forset with a more purposeful stride.

Twenty five miles further on, I finally caught up with Kay Dodson and Jim Templeton, but only after having been chased over Conic Hill and the full length of Loch Lomondside by Sylvia Watson. It sounds like it might have been fun, but no. From Rowardennan to Inverarnan is, I think the toughest stretch of the 'Way', 'neath the steep, steep sides of Ben Lomond" .

It was just after 11.30 when we emerged from the cool forest cover of Loch Lomondside into the midday sun at Inverarnan. The leaders had gone through an hour earlier: David Wallace, David Francis, Duncan Watson and Betty Hall. Nigel Rose was also ahead; but where was Tony Deall? A banana skin dropped from the tree above us and down swung Tony dressed only in loincloth, map case and running shoes and ready to resume the Race.

Inverarnan was the first chance since Rowardennan for the support cars to re-establish contact with the Race, and it was clear that David Francis was in some distress. Sirkka saw him half an hour later passing Derrydaroch Farm, shortly after having been passed by Duncan and Betty. He was looking shattered, yet he hung on to the leading group for two hours.

Sirkka had driven up from Livingston to Glen Falloch that morning to give me support for the second half of the Race. Half an hour after David Francis had gone through, and with no other runners in sight, she set off down the Way to look for me. I was suffering badly from the heat when she pulled me out of the Alt a' Chuilin and led me back to the car, here I took a 30-minute rest to change clothes, drink some coffee and stuff more jam butties into my bum-bag. I rejoined the Race a long way behind, but feeling good again.

The next checkpoint on the A82 two miles beyond Crianlarich was the half-way point. The Race continued through the heat of the afternoon. Past Tyndrum where , Sylvia went shopping for tins of rice pudding and peaches, through Bridge of Orchy to Inveroran. Here the Way rises over the Black Mount to Kingshouse, and it was while chasing Tony Deall on this climb that we came upon David Francis, still going through the motions of running. He was pulled out of the Race shortly afterwards at Kingshouse, but the lads in the drinks van had to sit on him for a couple of hours to stop him running off.

Sylvia Watson had been going through a bad patch after Kingshouse. At the top of the Devil's Staircase I paused for a moment to watch her several hundred feet below me, picking her way over the rock-strewn hillside. I planned to go straight down BACo pipeline into Kinlochleven. I knew Sylvia

was following the official Way markers which would add more than a mile to her descent. That would give me a half-hour cushion at Kinlochleven.

At Kinlochleven I knelt down and wept, forced to withdraw from the Race by injuries which had suddenly flared up coming off the Devil's Staircase. As many times earlier in the day, Sirkka had come out onto the Way to meet me and now led me gingerly back down into Kinlochleven, I was barely able to walk the last few hundred yards to the car park. There was no way I could continue for fourteen more miles.

I tried to lie down, which is the appropriate position to assume in death, and the only way they could get the coffin lid shut, I thought. But rigormortis set in even before final brain death and I couldn't unbend from my kneeling position. Sirkka rolled me onto my side and went over to Brian Dodson's car to beg some hot water for coffee. I sobbed quietly.

Sylvia went through as I was on my third cup of coffee, pausing only long enough to have a sip herself. I had been prodding and poking at my sore foot and tried on another pair of trainers to see if they gave better support under the arch. Sirkka mistook this as a sign that I was going somewhere. She yanked me up into a standing position, handed me a bulging bum-bag, pointed me north, and went back over to continue her chat with Jim Templeton's wife. In desperation I looked around for the checkpoint, any responsible person, who might intervene to stop this lunacy, but the lads from the drinks van had been delayed at Kingshouse. It was 9.45 when I began the steep climb out of Kinlochleven.

I emerged onto the tarmac road at Lundarva around midnight, in time to catch the Dodson and Templeton support cars on their third attempt to find the car park entrance. Sirkka stepped out with a daysack full of woolly jumpers, food, flask of coffee, torch and overdue library books. And so we set off together to shuffle the final six miles to Fort Bill.

There must be some grisly stories to tell about those last 20-odd miles from Kingshouse. Tony Deall whose food, clothes and torch were away with the drinks van when it was withdrawn from the Race to attend an emergency. Nigel Rose with his torn calf muscle. And the lads from Arbroath, benighted on the Devil's Staircase " We had to keep moving to keep warm; but we had a torch....".