

Laurie Anderson - 2001
What a way to celebrate a Birthday!

It's that feeling that all runners experience at one time or another. The slow awakening when every muscle and tendon is aching and your body has not moved from the moment you went to bed the night before. What had I been doing this time? Where have I been to get in this condition? But as the warm sunshine started to come in through the small window and I realized the roof was only a foot or so above my head, it all came back in a rush. It was the moment that I had been waiting the best part of three years for, the morning after the 'legendary' West Highland Way race, this time I had made it to the finish in the Fort William Leisure Centre car park.

Every June for the last 14 years on the Saturday nearest the longest day of the year a race is run along the West Highland long distance footpath from Milngavie to Fort William, 95 miles of mainly rough track with the equivalent of three ascents and descents of Ben Nevis thrown in to vary the torture. In 1999 and 2000, I had made unsuccessful attempts at the race and was beaten by the weather on my first race and was injured during the second year. Now with my third and final attempt, I promised to give myself every chance to complete the monster.

This year the uncontrollable factors in the preparation seemed to come together before the race began. This was as vital as having the energy to run the thing!

- The race was taking place on my Birthday.
- The weather forecast was favourable, little rain and not too hot.
- This was going to be third time lucky for me.

Then the things within my control were also happening in a way, which didn't seem to happen in the previous years.

- All eventualities for clothing and supplies were prepared.
- I hired a mobile home for over the weekend.
- I had kept a reasonable level of fitness for the year leading up to the race with no illnesses of note.
- An experienced support team (5 people and two dogs)
- Two days holiday prior to the race day.

As we left Glenrothes on the Friday evening at 11pm to travel to Milngavie for the 2am start the first doubts were crossing my mind. I had not been able to sleep that evening and my old groin strain that caused my retiral last year was again becoming troublesome.

My support crew or 'handlers' as I preferred to call them were top quality and proved to be a vital factor as events unfolded. Joe Holden, a super-vet not only in age but also in the fact he had previously completed the event, finishing fourth. Adrian Davis who although not a WHW finisher has experience in endurance events from the Western Isles to Tasmania. Louise Provan who would join our merry band at the halfway point, had previously attempted the race and although hoping to finish one day, was coming to see me suffer this time round. Robert Carson is as far from an athlete as possible, but as our van driver he was a vital cog in the operation. June my wife was along as in previous years to provide the food and emotional support, during my time on the track. Although I'm sure her main motivation was not to endure me bleating on about 'if only'. Making up the crew were Rosie and Ben the dogs.

Milngavie railway station car park on a Saturday morning at 1:30am with 58 competitors, 100 support crew, 60 vehicles and two film crews is a surreal atmosphere. The apprehension and nervous tension is almost visible, but after the shorts are on and assembling with everyone else in a pedestrian tunnel, a shout goes up and were off on a race with 58 other runners, but the real task in hand is to control your own mind and body during the miles ahead.

Normally the first 20 miles or so pass without incident as people settle into an appropriate pace and await daylight. But this year after only a mile I find the leaders coming towards me on the paths through woods in Milngavie. Not only that but they have their maps out!

We find that we have all missed a turning in the darkness and will need to run over a golf-course and wade a stream to get back on track, absolutely amazing considering the years of experience in the race that each of them have. So in only completing 2 miles we have lost 15 minutes.

Running steadily through fields of sleeping livestock in the half-light as dawn breaks, at one of the early meeting points I have 'Rosie' my border collie join my for some companionship, but

some of the other competitors think she has come from one of the farms on the route and try to shout her back, until I enlighten them.

One of the finest sights in the race is climbing Conic Hill at the 20 mile point and looking west over the lush green forests at the southern end of Loch Lomond, with the little islands dotted on the calm water.

This year however I must have been 'enjoying' myself too much and I found my checkpoint times slower and position well below where I expected to be. But this race is all about self-control and I wanted to concentrate only on finishing the course rather than have any pressure to race other people.

My intention was to finish this year even if it meant crawling all the way. At Rowardennan half way up Loch Lomond side the leaders were already 90 minutes ahead of me but after having completed slightly more than a marathon distance all be it a rough one, my intentions were to get some carbohydrate on board and a cup of tea. With this done, I also changed socks and removed stones from inside my shoes. At this time the midges were getting more vicious attacking both the runners and supporters, so more repellent was a must.

The next section of the race is one of the toughest, running as it does on the 'Bonnie Banks' to the head of the loch, a distance of 14 miles with no possibility to have any road support until Beinn Ghlas farm checkpoint. The terrain here rises and falls at the lochside with rocky outcrops and needs careful negotiation.

I struck up a conversation with a fellow runner from Troon who had completed the race the previous year in the time of 22hrs 30mins. Obviously this was a fantastic time, but he had said he needed to come back this year, as he didn't want to be sitting in the house thinking about everyone in the race during that day. Mad or what!

This section feels like it goes on and on for ever with the scenery changing very little, but having passed Ben Lomond the mountains around Crianlarich were beginning to be recognizable and as I arrived at the checkpoint I was feeling in reasonable shape with surprisingly few complaints coming from my legs considering the 41 miles I had completed. However I was surprised to find I was now sitting in 29th position.

I now started to focus on reaching the halfway point, which is where the path passes through forests above the Crianlarich. In what seemed to be no time I was up and past the halfway point and now on the path towards Tyndrum where it crosses the main road a couple of times. Due to the time on my feet by this point (12hrs) the time is very difficult to judge and an hour can just seem to disappear as you try to concentrate on the job in hand. At this point Joe had joined me and we ran into Tyndrum to meet the van beside the railway station and again change and take on board some food and hot and cold drinks.

At this stage I was now being watched very carefully by my handlers and was being fed either carbo/fruit/bread every 30 mins and drinking every 10 minutes whether I wanted to or not. This control of my intake was to prove a key factor later in the race.

A long steep climb out of Tyndrum was fine even as the day began to feel a little muggy but then running with Adrian on the old General Wade road towards Bridge of Orchy I began to feel reasonably strong and a self-assessment of my well being led me to believe that as we dropped down to the town with 62 miles completed that this year I would finish ...barring catastrophe.

Leaving the van at this point we were greeted by not only some rain but also hoards of walkers coming in the other direction taking part in the 'Caledonian Challenge', which was a sponsored walk involving 1800 people. This made it difficult to get past them as by this point my feet were feeling more and more tender and each little stone on the path feels very sharp on the sole of the foot.

My wife had joined me for the 3 miles out of Bridge of Orchy and although not a runner she enjoyed the section even though it was pouring by this time.

The rain was beginning to ease as Louise and I stepped out to negotiate the ten miles over Rannoch Moor. This can be one of the most difficult sections especially if the wind is blowing and if it's raining, but this year it was fairly kind. The walk up to the moor seemed to be taken at a slow pace but once up on the moor and dropping down to the Kingshouse Hotel I was beginning to pass the occasional other runner and still feeling good physically, but mentally things were beginning to fall apart as Louise had me convinced she was Naomi Campbell by the end of the run.

As I entered the van for the first time I detected some urgency from everyone to turn me around quickly and that possibly finishing in less than 24hrs could be done. Just as I was beginning to enjoy the hospitality in the van I was turfed out and Joe joined me to run over the Devils Staircase at the head of Glen Coe down to Kinlochleven at the other side. This was one section I had not been on previously and although I was pushing strongly uphill the descents seemed very rough and to last an eternity. I did pass a number of other runners high in the pass all looking like they had 'hit the wall' so again this gave me another boost.

Dropping on a track into the town was extremely painful on my already tender legs and I was looking forward to a well-earned rest and sustenance before I tackled the last couple of sections. However I could tell that the team was now focusing on pushing me forward with the 24hr target very much in sight. That said I was of the same mind but just needed to be told it. Adrian and I headed up the steep climb out the village with the Mamore Mountains all round, making a beautiful scene on a perfect evening. But as we started to gather pace along the path I started to experience lines before my eyes whenever I looked up. It was like two sets of black lace curtains coming together, however I didn't want this to be curtains for me and after eating something (my memory was suffering at this point too) I replenished whatever was deficient in my system and I carried on.

The last meeting point is at Landvara about six miles short of Fort William and the final mile to this point was where I was starting to feel the exertions of the previous 22hrs and I couldn't raise much more than a fast walk over the rocky road.

When I finally reached the meeting point all my running supporters and the two dogs decided to join my in the final run down Glen Nevis to the finish. I realized that I had just under 2 hours to get under the 24 hr mark, something under normal circumstances which could have been done in less than an hour, but as we headed into the forest with head torches lighting the way it became obvious to me that the final stopover had not done anything to help me and I couldn't raise much more than a stagger as we negotiated dark narrow paths and what seemed like huge steps. I knew we would emerge from the trees as we entered Glen Nevis with 3 miles to go, so I felt that we were going so slowly it was a pleasant surprise to emerge from the forest with almost an hour to spare and 3 miles downhill to the finish.

My mood changed completely and I was able to jog down the track towards the lights of the town, under the dark figure of Ben Nevis. Every step by this time was painful to my bruised left foot and knowing that a wrong turn at this point could spell disaster I would continually ask Joe and Adrian to confirm that we were on the right path. Somehow they were able to answer me with out showing any signs of annoyance as by this time they too had endured a long day. By the time we entered the finishing area in Fort William it was all smiles and as I reported in to reception I was to find I had crept in with 12 minutes to spare in 23hrs 48mins and 15th position. A shower in the centre to wash off the grime and sweat of the previous 95 miles and then a beer in the van to celebrate the birthday I had just missed I then climbed into bed at 3:30am. First home was Michael Maier of Germany in 17hrs 33mins, last home was Steve Wright in 32hrs 59mins. 38 finished from 58 starters.

In reflection on the race I was both immensely happy to finish and to creep under the 24-hour mark. It is not something to be taken lightly and preparation for the average occasional runner needs to begin at least 6 months before the race date to allow your body and mind to adjust. The combination of being totally focused in my mind that I was going to crack it this time and having an excellent support team worked wonders.

If anyone is thinking of giving it a go next year I am available to provide moral and physical support, but doing the race againnot in the foreseeable future!

For more information on the race go to <http://www.westhighlandwayrace.org/>

Laurie Anderson 26th July, 2001