

Tim Rodgers

The West Highland Way Race. 17th June 2000

Whilst on a visit to Loch Lomond during the summer of 1999 a taxi driver told me that there had been a race along the West Highland Way the previous weekend. As a South Downs 80 'orphan' I was immediately interested and wanted to know more, but my enquiries came to nothing and I put it to the back of mind, a place from which few projects ever emerge to see the light of day.

However in March 2000 after a flash of inspiration, I finally called the Trail Runners Association. They gave me Jim Stewart's address and a couple of weeks later, after call from Dario, I was in. Now all I had to do was to find two people who think that standing around in the middle of nowhere for up to thirty hours, getting eaten alive by midges whilst feeding bananas to an irrational and increasingly unstable individual, might just be good fun. Fortunately, I know people like that.

So it was that at 9pm on the Thursday before race day, I set off with Bob and Jaff (an sdw 80 veteran) for the long drive northwards. Jaff had thoughtfully converted the back of his Peugeot estate into a makeshift bed which I, as the pampered 'athlete' dozed in, whilst Bob and Jaff selflessly shared the driving, listening to Travis over and over again as we drove on through the night.

After a stop just outside Carlisle for an overpriced Granada Services greasy breakfast (It just had to be done), we arrived at Milngarvie at 8 am with indigestion and nowhere to stay.

Jaff suggested, with lids at half mast and eyes a latticework of distended bloodvessels, that camping would be an easy and cost effective option. Luckily, we found a B&B.

The next couple of hours were spent in Tesco's cafeteria, planning checkpoints and stocking up on provisions while we waited for the previous night's guests to vacate 'our' accommodation. To kill a bit more time we wandered around the town, stopping at a bookshop where Jaff bought a guide to the WHW. Flicking through the pages he arrived at a double page spread

showing a bleak stony track twisting into a misty infinity. This was Rannoch Moor some sixty miles into the race. Jaff shook his head and grinned as we hurried off to the B&B for some rest.

That evening I had an excellent meal of pasta washed down with a glass of wine at the Mill restaurant next to Tesco's before returning to the B&B to attempt sleep. All I could think of was where I would be in 24 hours time. Suddenly Jaff burst in. It was 1.30 and we needed to get a move on.

Fortunately we were only half a mile from the start, but even with over an hour to spare, my fidgety pre-race rituals seemed to take up all the remaining time. Finally we were called over for the blood curdling race briefing. Up until this point I hadn't realised that only 120 people had managed to complete the race in the past 17 years. Suddenly my sub 24 target seemed dangerously ambitious. Despite having completed the South Downs 80 twice, I knew I was undertrained for this event. I decided then that I wouldn't lift a finger until marathon distance had been passed.

And then, with cheers echoing round the concrete walls of the underpass, we were off into the night. Slowly the darkness gave way to a grey dawn, and it became clear that a quite a number of people had gone off at a very confident pace. I reminded myself that it was a finish I was after, as I was raising money for The Harefield Hospital Research Fund, and that anything else I might achieve would be a bonus.

Suddenly we were at Carbeth. I was surprised and pleased that Bob and Jaff were there to meet me. The midges were out in force, and I was getting bitten, so after a quick swig of coke and a spray of Autan, I resumed my cautious shuffle towards Drymen. At one stage having stopped to remove some zinc tape on my little toe, I was last on the road. This didn't bother me in the slightest, there were still almost 90 miles to go, and I was determined to use the first couple of hours to get properly 'bedded in' and comfortable.

By the time I arrived at Drymen it didn't look as though the sun was going to break through the thick cloud. This was slightly disappointing from a scenic point of view, although for running the conditions were excellent. There was a slightly chilly wind blowing and I decided to wear a Helly underneath my thin vest. Once again Bob and Jaff were on hand with everything I could possibly have needed, in this case a cup of tea, a syrup sandwich and a piece of chicken. By now I was looking forward to the ascent of Conic Hill and the arrival of Loch Lomond which would mark the end

of the first section of the race; my 'bedding in' period.

The ascent of Conic Hill brought with it a dramatic change of scenery. Loch Lomond, its southern expanse studded with dark wooded islands, seemed to mark our entry into the highlands. I began to think of how things would change beyond its northern tip. The weather by now was almost threatening rain, the previous day having been warm and sunny, and I must confess my kit was more geared towards a sunny day than the possibility of a downpour. I swept down into the midge infested car park at Balmaha feeling strong, but mindful of the fact that I had barely done 20 miles. As I stood chatting, Bob, shrouded in his mossie head net, sprayed me from head to toe with insect repellent, adding a certain piquancy to the potato salad I was spooning into my mouth.

Winding my way along the shores of Loch Lomond towards Rowardennan I noticed for the first time that the field had become strung out. At times there was nobody visible either in front nor behind. Steadily, I began to catch up with people. At first I took this as a sign that I might be going too fast and throttled back, but I felt comfortable, and by the time I arrived at

Rowardennan I had moved up to 18th place. The small wooded car park was crowded with race supporters, the midges must have thought it was Christmas. Bob and Jaff encased in their mesh head nets, were waiting with a pint of hot soup, I drank the lot, including the crispy croutons.

I had now passed marathon distance and I was feeling on top of the world. I decided to increase my pace a little and set off alone along the undulating broken shore towards Inversnaid, enjoying every minute of it. It was about this time that I received the first of many calls on my mobile from friends offering me encouragement and support. This was a tremendous morale boost and was especially valuable in the later stages of the race when things became very much harder.

Inversnaid Hotel comes as a sudden surprise, an oasis of civilisation in the midst of a jungle of twisted tree roots, sharp undulations and rocky outcrops. Once again Bob and Jaff, this time enjoying a rare midge free area, were on hand with food and drinks and words of encouragement.

The end of the Loch Lomond section was now imminent and I was looking forward to reaching the checkpoint at Inverarnan. I was still passing the odd runner and still full of running, but with 40 miles now behind me I knew it wouldn't be long until the miles began to take their toll.

The Inverarnan checkpoint team greeted me enthusiastically as I craned my neck in search of Bob and Jaff. Just then my mobile went off. It was Jaff. The signal was bad, but the gist of his message was that they hadn't been able to make it round from Inversnaid in time to meet me, but they would definitely meet me at Crainlarich. This wasn't really a problem, but by now I was aware that I had a job on my hands. I had also run out of water. After filling my bottle from a stream, I pressed on to Crainlarich where as promised, Jaff was waiting by way of consolation with what amounted to a small hamper; pasta salad, mars bars, bread, chicken, rice pudding, fruit salad, bananas, tea and coke. The next five miles to Tyndrum are quite

hilly, and with a full stomach I was struggling to maintain my earlier pace. Tyndrum at 53 miles into the race, is definitely over half way, and I was glad to be counting down to the finish, even if it was another 42 miles away. I tottered away from the checkpoint with yet more food inside me, pasta twists with garlic sauce this time. By now my stomach was like a balloon and I had eaten so much the rhythm of my breathing was affected. I decided to walk until things settled down.

The section to Bridge of Orchy was the fastest yet, but I had begun to notice that my legs, in particular my shins, were really starting to hurt as the relentless pounding from the stony granite track began to tell. Bob came out to meet me about a mile from the checkpoint. I was grateful for this as he probably saved me from going off course. For the first time I sat in the car to rest my tender legs as we discussed the possibility of an RV at Ba Cottage in the middle of Rannoch Moor. I was really enthusiastic about this, as it would be a welcome break on the longest and most barren section of the race. At this point we were advised that it was possible to get a car up there. This was good news for Bob and Jaff, as it would save them a long hike up from the A82.

With a deep breath I set off up the rugged track to commence what I regarded as being the make or break section of the race. Sub 24 was well on the cards, and I had moved up to eighth place. All of this was a bonus, but by now there was a lot to lose as well. As the stony track stretched away in front of me into misty infinity, I recognised the bleak scene portrayed in Jaff's book. I jogged as often as I could bear to, but the hard, rocky trail was really hammering my shins. Occasionally there were stretches of narrow peaty pathway to the side of the main track and

whenever these occurred I teetered along them, grateful for some relief from the harsh pounding. At last the way began to drop down towards Ba Bridge. But something was worrying me. The track had become very much rougher, it would be impossible to get a car along it. I wondered if it was any better from the opposite direction. This didn't seem likely, and it dawned on me that Bob and Jaff probably weren't going to be waiting for me at Ba Cottage. Sure enough as the cottage came into view I could see no one. Perhaps they were exploring the ruin? But no, there had been a misunderstanding. They were in fact waiting for me at Blackrock cottage, a mile and three quarters from Kingshouse, and you could get a milk float up there. This was a major setback as I had run out of water, and my pulverised shins weren't going to allow me to climb down to the stream. I pressed on. Just then, as I hobbled onwards up to the crest which marks the descent to Kingshouse, I saw two men on mountain bikes picking their way up towards me, illuminated by intermittent bursts of sunshine. They drew level with me and stopped. I would like to offer my thanks to these guys, unfortunately I don't know their names, they were supporters of one of the continental runners and I was to bump into them several more times. Their kind words and offers of drinks made a big difference at a low moment for me. I passed Blackrock cottage, grumbling ungraciously and pausing for a swig of water.

At last Kingshouse came into view and I staggered into the checkpoint in considerable discomfort. By now my legs were very painful, and I asked if we had any pain killers. No sooner had I asked than I became convinced that taking them would be in contravention of the rules. Bob returned with paracetamol which I refused, settling instead for a clean pair of socks, a pint of tea and some rice pudding. I sat in the car blathering nonsense in between shivering bouts, for a full 25 minutes before dragging myself out for some more West Highland Way.

Shortly after setting off my mobile went off again. This time it was three mates of mine phoning from a pub in Stepney, sinking a few pints before the Germany match. Our situations could scarcely have been more different, but despite feet that felt like clubs of raw meat and shins that were seemingly being attacked by a maniac with a cold chisel, I was happy. Well, sort of. Ironically, the steep climb of the Devils staircase provided me with a form of relief, as negotiating the gradient meant that I was using different muscle groups, allowing my shins respite from the ceaseless pounding. On arrival at the top however, the track became more rugged and broken than ever before. The descent to Kinlochleven was little short of agonising, and apart from the final section I managed only a bare minimum of running, lurching along through the housing estate as best I could.

Someone had told me that the WHW shelter could be difficult to find, and I was relieved when I saw Bob jogging towards me to lead the way in. The good news was that I was way ahead of my schedule for sub 24. In fact if I could do the last 15 miles in 3.30 I would get under 20 hours. And with Scottish licensing laws, a pint of Orkney Skull Splitter in the Grog & Gruel was a distinct possibility! I left Kinlochleven with Jaff accompanying me and a renewed spring in my hobble. Then a sort of reality kicked in.

The last 15 miles were a blur of freezing cold, clammy heat, thirst, nausea, an inferno of bites, interminable grey vistas disappearing into the gloom, claustrophobic suffocating woods screaming with midges, red toads slithering across the path wherever I looked, cow dung, giant fences, hills, 20 hours on the clock and not a street light in sight, an endless dark descent.....

Then suddenly, Bob, hunched over a roaring Peak stove, hastily knocking up a brew by the roadside. ³Here you are Tim, mate. Brew for you². he said offering up a thermal mug. The last thing I wanted at that moment in time was a brew. In fact, I felt like spewing. Jaff, having witnessed my earlier retching spoke for me. ³Bob, I dont think he¹s up for it, mate².

I meandered off up the whirling orange street, whimpering to myself, with Jaff quietly shuffling along beside me trying to match my pace, which by now was roughly equal to the growth rate of fungi.

Bob drew alongside in the car. ²Anything I can do for you, Tim?² I felt a strange need to be entertained. ³Yes please Bob². I murmured, ³could you put Travis on the CD for me?² ³No problem, mate². The raucous strains of Massive Attack thudded down the sleeping street. ³Bob, he wanted Travis. Its number 4². A pause before a new form of dance music hitherto unknown to me, but nonetheless forming an important part of Jaff's son's C.D. collection rent the air. ³Its alright Bob², I croaked. ³This will do². ³No worries, Tim. You asked

for Travis and you¹ll have it.² ³No really, Bob. I dont mind this, honest² I whispered in desperation. Jaff said something and it all went quiet. At last we came to the roundabout. We were now in Fort William with less than half a mile to go. ³Come on Tim. Nearly there. ³No we¹re bloody not! It's

miles!², I whined. I was convinced they were lying to me and I wasn't going to fall for it! By this time my progress had been reduced to walking sideways whilst supporting myself hand over hand along people's fences and garden walls.

As I passed the Nevis Bank Hotel I looked up to see a man in a bow tie holding out his hand. I took it and he shook my hand, ³Well done .You¹'ve done very well². I was so touched I could have cried. I was also very relieved, as he had told me that the bar was still open for residents, and we were booked in there. ³Look Tim, come on its here!² Nah, They must think I was born yesterday I thought to myself as I stood there swaying, staring saucer eyed at the entrance to a leisure centre. A woman emerged. ³What are you standing around out there for? Come in and finish!² she said a touch impatiently. It had taken me 22 hours 15 minutes and 17 seconds. I had finished in sixth place.

Fifteen minutes later my ankles were swelling to the size of my calves and dark blotches were spreading over my shins. Bob thought I might have a stress fracture, and as there was an A&E just a few hundred yards down the road, decided that it might be wise to visit. I was convinced it was a plot to keep me out of the bar. In fact I'm still convinced it was a plot to keep me out of the bar.

As I lay on the couch in casualty, the doctor asked me about the race. ³Where did it start?² ²Er, Glasgow², I replied. ³So what are you doing here?² ³Er, it was from Glasgow to here². ³You're mad! Are there many more of you?² ³I'm not sure, but I came sixth². ²And I thought I was going to have a quiet night! he groaned. ³Anyway, I think we're going to keep you in

overnight². My heart sank as I realised I was going to be deprived of my celebratory wee dram. A pretty staff nurse wheeled me to the bathroom and began filling the tub with steaming hot water, ³would you like me to bath you or will you be alright on your own?² ³No it's ok, thanks. I'll manage by myself². I replied, obviously suffering from some form of delirium. Perhaps I was trying save her from having to look at my feet which Bob, a paramedic with years of experience with the London Ambulance Service had said were the worst he'd ever seen still attached to a person.

³Are you alright in there?² I awoke and sat bolt upright, sending a tidal wave of bath water slapping onto the floor. ³Won't be a minute!² The nurse led me into the ward and I eased myself between the crisp white sheets and slept. The next morning I awoke to find the ward filled with sunlight and an unpleasant smell emanating from beneath the bed. I leant over and iscovered a plastic bag containing what was left of my trainers. I thought about keeping them as a souvenir, but on closer inspection decided against it. I was taken to be X-rayed. I expected my shin bones to resemble the glaze on a Ming vase, but there was nothing! The doctor said it could be compartment syndrome, where the sheaths encasing the muscles become frayed. There was plainly something wrong because my ankles we're bulging over my unlaced trainers and I couldn't walk. I still felt like a wimp though.

Bob & Jaff arrived to collect me. We went straight to the pub. We didn't have long before the presentation and after a couple of quick pints, Jaff insisted on wheeling me there. I didn't have much say in the matter. I felt very self conscious as I rose unsteadily from my seat in the Nevis Bank Hotel to collect my crystal goblet and souvenir porridge. Porridge? Perhaps someone felt I needed a few more hairs on my chest. All too quickly it was time to leave. We wished we had booked another day off work to relax in the glorious sunshine, but it was not to be. I squeezed myself into the back of the car and drifted off to sleep with the sound of Travis softly speeding us home.

This epic race was the highlight of my year, but it was one I would have missed without the help of some good friends to whom I would like to offer my thanks. Thanks most of all to Bob and Jaff. Thanks to Dario. Thanks to everyone who turned out to man checkpoints, and to everyone who offered me a word of encouragement along the way.

Thanks to the staff of Fort William Hospital. (I'm still trying to figure where to put the stamp on a pair of crutches), and lastly to everyone who sponsored me so generously for a worthy cause. Congratulations to Wim and Kate for their amazing records and to everyone who turned up to have a go.

Tim Rogers. September 2000