

Tom Blaylock

The West Highland Way Race 2000

It's 2:15 a.m. on Saturday 17th June. The alarm on my watch starts beeping. It was pretty pointless setting it anyway as I have lain awake all night, my brain in turmoil, entirely occupied with the prospect of the huge, epic adventure that lies ahead: 153K (95 miles) of running over rough terrain in Western Scotland, from Milngavie, just North of Glasgow, to Fort William. Contrary to popular belief, running ultra-distance races requires a bit more thought than just switching off your one remaining brain cell and putting one foot in front of the other until somebody tells you to stop. The serious ultra runner actually has two brain cells: one to tell his legs to move and the other to formulate race strategy. I have two choices: to set off at a similar pace to last year and rely on my improved fitness to make a late charge which will improve on last year's time but still leave me way behind the leaders, or adopt the high-risk strategy of setting off at potential race-winning speed and achieving a truly outstanding performance. Some good races and training sessions in preceding weeks have made me supremely confident so, unusually for me, I choose the latter strategy. 2:58 a.m. Boom!! The Starter's cannon goes off (the b*****s have started early!) and lights go on all over Milngavie. OK I made that last bit up: actually a girl whispered "go" and off we went. Despite my game plan, a group of about half a dozen runners slowly pulls away but I am content to stick to my 18 hour schedule and cruise through Checkpoint 1 at Drymen (20K) in 1hour 48 min. As I pull out I notice Dave Wallace of Harmeny Balerno AC (known to some – well, only me actually- as the Balerno Bullet) jogging easily in behind me. Dave is a previous winner of this event and his name strikes fear into the heart of any Pretender to the Crown. (Apologies for some of the prose, folks, I've been reading too many Mills `n` Boons). The route to the next checkpoint halfway up Loch Lomond takes in the long uphill (superb!) of Conic Hill followed by a steep downhill (yuk!) to the Loch. I reach Rowardennan on schedule, in 5th place, and continue up the loch. For a few K the Way is a broad track, eventually narrowing down to a path. I overtake two runners in quick succession. I was 7 minutes behind the second-placed runner at the last checkpoint but suddenly there she is about 100m ahead. Kate Jenkins is an outstanding runner, not someone to be trifled with. I decide to have a pee before overtaking her and find that I now cannot close the extra gap. There now follows several K of will-sapping rough track on the banks of the loch, tree roots and rocks making progress desperately slow. I arrive at Inverarnan on schedule. My quads feel a little sore but no more than I'd expect after 65K of running. I jog on up Glen Falloch, catching occasional glimpses of Kate's red vest about 2 minutes ahead of me. I pass the unmarked half-way point at the summit in just over eight hours and begin the long bumpy downhill stretch to the A82. My quads are hurting a bit more now as I pick my way slowly over the rocky path. At the bottom I meet my minder Rob who offers me the sun-tan lotion (!??) as requested. At this point the Balerno Bullet appears behind me. I am not surprised at this. His wife is waiting for him and he stops for a drink or something. The next few K are flattish so I get a good rhythm going and arrive at Tyndrum ahead of schedule: 85K (53 miles) in 9 hours 14 min. The Balerno Bullet breezes in behind me and says "don't panic boy, the race starts at Kingshouse". This guy's physique worries me: he makes me look like Oliver Hardy. Kate is 6 minutes ahead and the leader is 31 minutes ahead. In the lead is Wim Epskamp, referred to in my report on last year's race as "The Dutchman". Knowing nothing of his credentials, my hope now rests on him "dying" in the later stages, suffering a complete collapse as the Balerno Bullet, who I assume to be playing a shrewd waiting game, tracks him down. After a few minutes' rest my legs feel a bit wobbly but I eventually get a reasonable pace going. Although my quads are hurting I am heartened by the prospect of a lot of flattish running in the next 30K. I continue through Bridge of Orchy to the top of Mam Carraigh and then downhill to Victoria Bridge. The pain is desperate but, having staggered to the bottom, I now have several K of gentle uphill across Rannoch Moor. Even this is now a bit painful but at least I can maintain a reasonable jog. Thoughts now turn from having a good race to just surviving. I toy with the idea of walking for 1 minute and jogging 4 to dilute the pain but by a furious effort of will I keep jogging. I then calculate that all I have to do is jog 48K in 7 hours in complete agony to get 4th place and a PB. (I think this is how ultra runners acquire their "mad" image). I cross the saddle into Glencoe and jog painfully down to Kingshouse Hotel (pain is a completely inadequate description). I check in at 4:05 pm, incredibly only 10 minutes behind schedule but dying big time. Rob hands me his mobile, "it's Sue" (my wife, back home).

- "How are you doing" "I'm in complete agony" "Well pull out then" "But I'm still moving"
- "Well carry on then!"

I "jog" (shuffle more like) down to Altnafeadh and the start of the Devil's Staircase with Rob alongside. He's really looking forward to accompanying me over the final scenic stages. At least I can walk up the steep switchback path.

At last comes the dawning realisation that to carry on is futile. I can barely manage more than a walk, which might just get me to Fort William by midnight. We reach the top and continue walking along a flattish stretch. At the first long downhill I realise I am in agony just walking. For those in search of the true meaning of "my legs have gone", this is it! We meet a couple of hikers who offer me some Tiger Balm and 4 Ibuprofen. These have no perceptible effect. I walk backwards down the really steep bits until the final long steep jeep track down to Kinlochleven. Rob jogs on to the checkpoint where Clive, my second minder, is waiting with the car. With a bit of luck he might be able to come and pick me up. After a couple of hours of shuffling, the next runner finally passes me. The gap must have been enormous. At last Clive appears accompanied by a race official. "Sorry mate, there's a barrier across the track". Well thanks a lot! I learn that Wim, heading for a course record, blasted through Kinlochleven checkpoint before it had opened- he met the officials walking down the road. Kate was also in devastating form, looking to break her own ladies' course record. On this occasion the Balerno Bullet had no answer to this ferocious injection of pace. I had a brainwave. "Have you got a bike?", I asked the marshal. He jogged off down the hill. Finally, Rob appeared with the bike, about 50 metres (great!) from the car. At last the suffering was over. Four hours after leaving Kingshouse (15 K ago) we drove up to the checkpoint and I wound the window down:

- "er...I'm pulling out now..."
- "OK pal"

We drove round to the Finish at Fort William leisure centre. Kate was sitting outside wrapped in a towel. I approached her, awe-struck, and congratulated her on her extraordinary performance. She had knocked over an hour off her course record to finish in 17 hours 37 minutes.

Indoors, Wim was sitting in the foyer looking extremely pleased with himself. He had demolished the course record in a time of 16 hours 24 minutes. He told of his running background: he runs several ultras every year, mostly 100K races, and trains between 160 and 200K per week. His Sunday run is commonly 60K in five hours. He is Dutch 100K champion with a PB of 7 hours. His "indifferent" performance at last year's race (not far in front of me) he explained by saying he hates to run in the cold and rain, which begs the question: why go to Scotland to race? It gave a great lift to my spirits to be in the presence of this supremely gifted, yet completely unknown, athlete – a world away from the hype and razzmatazz of "real" athletics. Nevertheless, coming to terms with my own disappointment is extremely difficult. The commitment to training, at the expense of other aspects of my life, fostered expectations of high achievement. To be a heroic failure, in the best British tradition, offers scant consolation. There is an element of the personal odyssey of self-discovery in taking on a huge challenge such as the WHW, but if anybody starts spouting some Kipling nonsense about triumph, disasters and impostors, I'll thump him in the face! It appears that, whatever it takes to be an 18 hour WHW runner, I ain't got it. Or could I train more? Even my "measly" 160-180K per week, which I only do for a quarter of the year, caused a bit of aggro at home and also left me too tired to get a life. So immediately after the race it was "never again", 24 hours later it's "lets take a year out and do something less demanding like the London to Brighton". If the usual pattern continues, within 48 hours I'll be planning next year's campaign... Running may not be addictive (when you're in serious training, rest days are eagerly looked forward to) but taking part in a truly extraordinary event most certainly is. Try it!

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