

Ian Campbell 1989
Written by Susan Bailey

The West Highland Way Run is growing in popularity. Susan Bailey, who helped provide the support for Livingston runner Ian Campbell, takes us on a 95 mile journey from Milngavie to Fort William.

Milngavie Railway Station Car Park, 2am, Saturday, June 24 1989.

WHILE the rest of Milngavie was trying to get to sleep, 49 entrants for the West Highland Way race, with their back-up teams, were registering by lamplight. Body clocks were confused. To eat or not to eat? Would the record go? Mike Hartley, he of the 212 mile Southern Uplands Way, was here; David Wallace, last year's winner, was back with a load of experience. Anything could happen over the 95 miles and 9400 feet climb.

In 1979, painter and decorator Bobby Shields of Clydesdale Harriers ran the entire length solo in 19 hours and 16 minutes. The reply came in 1985 from Duncan Watson of Lochaber AC, who challenged Bobby to a race. Bobby was an accomplished hill runner who'd won a string of arduous hill races, including the Ben Nevis race in 1967. Duncan was a whisky salesman trying to regain a measure of fitness!

The West Highland Way, however, is a great leveller. A race only recognises one winner and, as Duncan hung on the Bobby all the way up Loch Lomondside, both men decided that neither deserved to go down as a loser. They shook hands and finished together in 17-48-30.

Last year Duncan decided to open the challenge again, this time to anyone; 20 started and 14 finished, eight of these under 24 hours. The joint record held.

As this year's temperatures hovered in the 70's for days beforehand, the threat of dehydration, heat exhaustion and sunburn became almost as big a worry as the Rowardennan midge.

The race began at a suicidal nine minute mile pace, with the leaders dashing through Carbeth as if there was nowhere else to go.

John Dennison, of Livingston, who was recovering from a slipped disc but was determined at least to make a start, was already in considerable discomfort. David Wallace cruised through in the middle of the pack without having broken sweat. Hilary Spenceley of Carnethy had never done more than 30 miles and didn't know if she could stay on her feet for eight hours, never mind her 23 hour target.

At Drymen, the pace was still hot, set by Hartley, and Sandy Jack of Livingston. Our man Ian was up there with them too. Already, smiling Nigel Rose of Carnethy was being pestered by everyone offering him support, and being Nigel he kept stopping to say thanks.

At Rowardennan Sandy and Mike blazed through so we ventured out to prepare the plastic bags of powdered isostar, the jelly babies, and more creamed rice that were to see Ian through to Inversnaid. With Ian only five minutes behind the leaders and 20 minutes ahead of schedule already we made him promise to stop at Inversnaid. Meanwhile it was a case of backtracking to Drymen, good to see Drew (Turnbull), Mark (Kassyk), John (Dennison) and Hilary all looking comfortable. Twenty five miles into the race and Hilary was looking positively serene.

After a quick stop in Crianlarich we found Sandy, now in second place, running along the road with smoke coming out of his ears. A misunderstanding with his support team had brought him off the Way too soon! He got going again, with David Wallace unobtrusively moving up to third place and Ian, Mick Francis of Forres, and John Maitland of Lochaber hanging in behind. Mick, an experienced ultra runner (his forte being I00K) became Ian's running mate for much of the time. His participation in the Highland Cross the previous weekend didn't seem to have done him any harm. Ah, but there were still two marathons to go.

The flat section between Auchreoch and Bridge of Orchy, which should have been fast, saw Mike going through a temporary bad spell, though still 15 minutes ahead of Sandy, who was doggedly

pursuing with David (had he broken sweat yet?), another five minutes behind him. Ian, too, had problems here, in the form of cramp, which slowed him to 15 minute mile pace. We bought some salt at the Bridge of Orchy Hotel and dosed his nuts and raisins. However, Ian dashed past us at three minute mile pace shouting: "I don't know what's wrong, I'm having a purple patch!"

We shrugged, packed up and meandered along to the Inveroran Hotel and Victoria Bridge, known as the West Highland Way equivalent of the "wall" because it was a common low point for many runners last year.

It hit Sandy with a vengeance. He'd gone astray again and was suffering with sore calves and arches. I told him if he could walk through this, he'd be okay and turned my attention to keeping the hens off Ian's sandwiches while he soaked his feet. John Maitland, too, lost ground here but Ian and Mick were still comfortable.

By this time, we were quite out of touch with anyone else and welcomed Bill Gauld's arrival, while we were boiling up fresh water, with news of the rest of the pack. Mark had dropped out with a bad leg at Crianlarich, John Dennison had picked up, Hilary was sailing along as though she was out for a Sunday afternoon jaunt, and Nigel had made at least 70 new friends.

Kingshouse saw the arrival of Ian McIntyre of Livingston, who had been crippled out of the Capricorn. Reaching Altnafeadh, I doubt it occurred to anyone that they had run the equivalent of three marathons but they had. It was time to stock up and dress up for the 850 foot climb over the Devil's Staircase. Sandy, a 2-50 marathon man, had little hill experience, so Ian went round with him, leaving me to pack up and drive round to Kinlochleven. As they set off into the low cloud and drizzle, I put the foot down, aware that I had five times the distance to go.

I arrived at 5pm, in time to catch a rumour that the leaders had been through at 4.30 pm. Ian had a bad time on that hill and Mick must have struggled too, because it was 5.35 before Mick appeared and 5.45 before Ian emerged from the crumbly path - at last beginning to look as though he'd done a bit of work. Drizzle and low cloud were giving way to heavy rain, and as I raced round to Fort William and the track to Lundavra my heart went out to Hilary, Drew, John Dennison, smiling Nigel, and all those further back, with hours left to go.

Driving up the desolate undulating Lundavra road, the army told me the leaders had passed within two minutes of each other and were now home. By coincidence, Ian's number was being relayed to them from the last checkpoint but they didn't know how far away that was.

I set off to meet Ian and John and gave Mick a fright as he'd missed his team in Kinlochleven and thought he'd have a good lead. Wrongly interpreting my presence as a sign that Ian's arrival was imminent, he put on a heck of a spurt! Ian arrived soaking, shivering and sore.

Ian had a minute and a half to get home inside the record when he came into sight at the finish. He had said, weeks before, that it wasn't the kind of race in which he wanted to finish with anything left at all, so I took him at his word and charged to meet him, telling him not to go for every second. He didn't need me or anyone else to tell him that, though it hadn't even occurred to him that the record was in sight. His target had been to break 20 hours, not 17-48-30 but he finished a beautiful 5 seconds inside.

Only later did we learn that David had overtaken Mike, and got his double win, on the final seven miles stretch at Lundavra. Dave finished in 15-26-20, six minutes, 38 minutes ahead of Mike. Mick Francis, Ian's running mate, having missed two stops, had pulled well ahead to finish in 17-08-51.

The Nevis Bank Hotel couldn't do enough for us, showing tremendous understanding of the physical and emotional needs of the participants. They provided showers, soup and sandwiches for runners and back-ups. The local St Andrew's Ambulance people took over when the staff retired, serving food and patching up blisters and other sore bits long into the night.

Such is the respect awarded anyone who finishes this epic journey, that aching legs were goaded into movement time and time again to go out to the porch to greet new arrivals. Sandy had walked a lot, suffering from bleeding blisters and suspected fallen arches, but he managed a courageous run to finish seventh in 19-55-03. There was a great welcome for first woman, Kay Dodson (Law and District), in 13th position in 21-24-25 and for Hilary, who finished with aching toes in 22-12-47.

Smiling Nigel trotted in in 22-33-34, with 150 new friends. Twenty four runners arrived within 24 hours. They all deserve a mention as they all have a heroic story to tell but there isn't space. Even 29th and last finisher, triathlete Roger Topham who appeared out of the still torrential rain just before 5am, was delighted at improving on last year's time by six hours!

Mike Hartley claimed: "That was the best long distance race I've ever had and I'll certainly be back next year." But David Wallace said he wouldn't. "That was my best shot," he smiled.

Somehow, no-one paid public credit to Duncan Watson himself, whose personal involvement is legendary and who feels he should know every runner personally, In a way he does. He organised not only with efficiency but with great sensitivity for the feelings of each individual.

There were no losers, for even the 20 who didn't finish had been part of "an amazing event". Those who were there this year in any capacity must have been touched by the words of Sri Chinmoy printed on David Wallace's t-shirt:

"The determination in your heroic effort will permeate your mind and heart even after your success or failure is long forgotten."

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