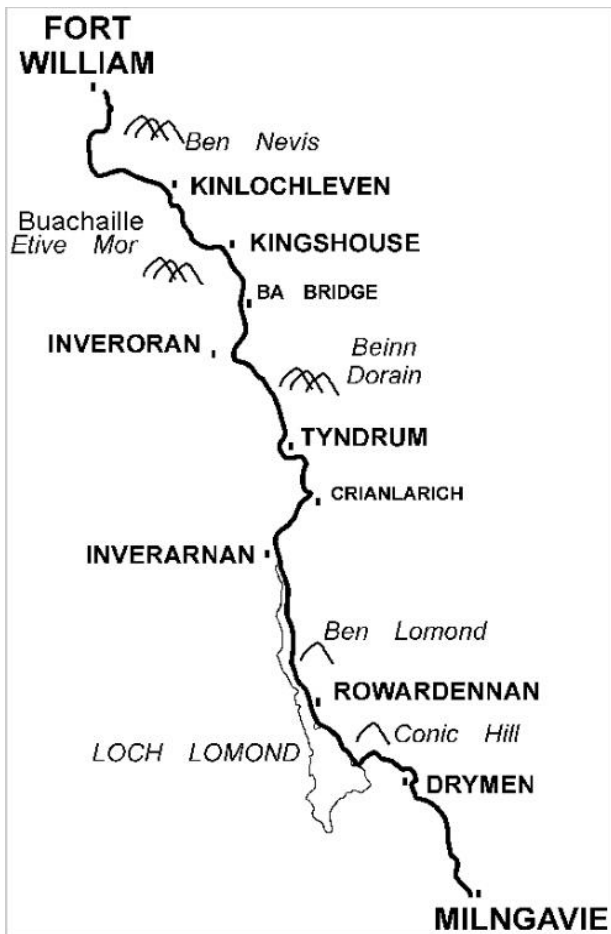


2017 West Highland Way Race Report (Allan Grant)



Here we go again I can hear some of you say! After a 'sabbatical' last year here I was for the 6th time toeing the line at the West Highland Way Race at 1 am on Saturday 24th June.

In the weeks preceding there was the usual mixture of fear and anticipation for what is inevitably a deep challenge to body, mind and spirit. Once more I was indebted to have a great support team. 3 'veterans' in the form of Angus McKee (driver), Don Mellor and Martin Reid who were my second half support runners. All of them had supported me twice or more before. Whether it is my powers of persuasion or something addictive about the event I am unsure. My first half support crew were James Hain and Shirley McClellan both of whom were new but very enthusiastic. Also Shirley's dog Brambles who showed a lot of patience and did not eat my food. Once again Elisabeth stepped up as that ever present help and veteran now of all 6 races.

Elisabeth was around from Glencoe onwards having gone home after the start for some sleep that first night. However her support had started long before as her encouragement when wearying of training in the months preceding were fundamental in getting me to the start. She also said that a 6th goblet would make a dinner set!

Another common factor with previous runs was doing it in aid of Starfish Asia who do such a great work in helping educate often impoverished children from Christian families in Pakistan. This time I was running for a particular project – to get a vehicle to take teachers to Waheedabad Christian Middle School.

I have come to see these ultra runs as pilgrimages. In some senses a retreat from normal life as you have to live 'in the moment' for many hours. Much of our lives we are living in the past or looking to the future. Of course there is no retreat from the sheer physical effort involved but sustained effort is only possible if body and spirit work together. As has been my tradition I once again requested and got race no. 121. Psalm 121 are one of the 'ascent' psalms that the ancient Israelites sang as they ascended to Jerusalem on pilgrimage. It alludes to looking to the creator of the hills for our help; God's alert care that we do not stumble; protection from the elements and watching over our going out and coming in. All very pertinent in the practical sense of going on a long journey by foot but are also valuable lessons for the longer marathon of life we are all engaged in.

Once again thankful for Gordon and Kerstin Dutton making their home available as a much appreciated shelter in the time immediately preceding race start. After registration and weigh in at St Joseph's RC church hall next door we met as support crew in their home for a welcome cup of tea and home baking. We were also joined by my cousin Mary, husband Tom and friend Vin. Tom and Mary had been part of my support team some



Me, James, Angus, Don, Shirley and Brambles



Registration

years previously and Tom was now also running the race!

Soon it was time to leave the comfort and warmth of normality and out into the night to hear the traditional race briefing at 12:30am. The last 30 mins passed in a blur and I made sure that I was sufficiently back in race that I would not go off too fast. This was no sprint and I did not want to wear myself out by being carried along by 'sub 24 hour' types. It is so important to run your own race and pace and not be influenced by others. My strategy was to use my heart rate monitor for the first 31.5 km to Balmaha and then switch off for later in race. A practical reason was that my watch battery would not last the whole time anyway. However by Balmaha I should be well settled into the race and did not want to be distracted by heart rate. The watch's use as a GPS at the end was more for measuring the remaining distance, a psychological boost. So most of the race I would just be using my watch for the time which was the way I wanted it!

At exactly 1 am off went the horn and we were off from Milngavie station car park through the main street and into the dark of Mugdock woods. Unlike the excited chatter of the shorter 85km Fling Race in April most folk are much more pensive and I sense conserving energy. Whilst still in the woods after a few km a figure flew past us all at an incredible speed. He seemed like he was leading the field in a 5km race and not 154km! Turned out he was the race winner and soon to be record holder! Rob Sinclair had sped off at the start and then took wrong turn in the woods and then had to backtrack and come from behind to pass everybody. *(Rob's performance was extraordinary and smashed the record in 13 hours 41 mins. To put it another way I was not far past Tyndrum when he was in Fort William!).*

Anyhow my own race was going according to plan. At Beech Tree (2:20am) was greeted by James and Shirley and high fived them. At this stage there was no help needed. Shortly after that I came behind John Kynaston a well known figure in ultra running. I was surprised as he is a much faster runner than me. I had a brief chat and realised that he was in pain. Sadly he had ankle problems and later had to pull out of race.

Although dawn had not arrived when leaving Drymen (20km) there was sufficient daylight to turn off the headtorch which was nice and felt I was greeting a new day. I was only 2 mins off my predicted time. It felt good although of little consequence so early in the race. It was then through what's left of Garabhan forest to view the first major test of the race, Conic Hill. Made sure I ascended without pushing too hard and then rewarded with that beautiful view of Loch Lomond in the early light from the summit. It was then a controlled descent towards Balmaha (31.5km) to be greeted enthusiastically by James and Shirley. I was less than a minute out from my predicted time on arrival so that was encouraging. Some hot tea from a flask; a yoghurt, oats and honey mix and an egg sandwich to take with me and I was off again. Had arranged that James and Shirley would also meet me in Rowardennan.

As in the past I find that time has a different feel to it. It was still the very early hours of the morning and the only sounds were the cacophony of birdsongs heralding a new day. Having run through the night I felt mentally that it was already the evening and had lived a full day. The start had only been 4-5 hours previously but in every sense it felt a day away. And so I left Balmaha. Shortly after departure I was overtaken by a friend Cammie Kennedy who was doing this for the first time. He was running well and was not to see him again till after the race.

The route on the east side of Loch Lomond looks like it is just following the loch side and would therefore be relatively flat. In fact, there are lots of undulations with a number of small hill climbs. I was very familiar with the route but it doesn't make it any less arduous. However I was quietly encouraged that on arrival Rowardennan (44km, 6:58am) I was still only a few minutes behind my predicted time. Here James and Shirley again met me and managed to down some chicken soup and take with me some ham, cheese and pickle sandwiches. James and Shirley would motor back to Balmaha and grab some rest. I would next meet them in Bein Glas at the very top of Loch Lomond. The rest of my time on the loch I would be on my own. I had a drop bag for the next stop in Inversnaid (a bag with food and drink pre-packed by myself and taken by organisers). A few km north of Rowardennan and the route now followed the 'low road' which was a change from previous years. It means for about 4km you leave the wider forestry road for a very pretty winding path by the lochside. That's nice if you are out for a stroll but in reality it is more arduous and a bit longer.

Weather-wise things had been good so far. A cool wind with occasional very light rain. Arrival at Inversnaid (55km) and a few minutes seated on a picnic bench beside the hotel. Most of my stops I had scheduled for 5 mins, time which goes very quickly!

So I left Inversnaid and soon it was in to a 4 km section of technical terrain – very rocky with exposed tree roots everywhere meaning most of us have to resort to clambering. Many slow to a similar pace for this section so there is a bit of a bunching up together and it's hard to overtake even if you wanted to. Despite the togetherness it is quiet as you need to concentrate hard on where you are putting your feet. It was a mental and physical relief to enter into more open ground at the top of the loch.

At this stage of the race you start to recognise that it's the same people around you are travelling with. Some are better on downward bits so overtake me and then I overtake them on climbs or vice-versa. Running pace is almost like a fingerprint. It seems you can have the same pace over the distance but no one seems to have the same pace over

different terrain. And so it was that the same people would appear, disappear and then reappear again. This was the case with some all the way to Fort William.

From the top of loch Lomond there is a gradual ascent before a descent in to Bein Glas farm and the next checkpoint. In Bein Glas (65km, 11:12am) I met James and Shirley for the last time as they would be handing on to the second stage support crew. A brief sit, some food and drink and cheerios with them and it was off again. They had done a great job which for them meant long periods of inactivity and waiting punctuated by short 5 min periods when I met them. Their patience and willingness to help with the menial was a great encouragement. Separate from me they would meet up with the other half of support and hand over my food, clothes and gear. Also heard that the whole team had a very nice fish supper in Tyndrum while they were waiting for me to arrive, something I was a bit jealous of, in retrospect!

After Bein Glas there follows relatively easy terrain and this encouraged a bit more chat and congeniality with fellow runners. However there was also a degree of fatigue. My next meeting of support would not be for another 15km, a good while away at the halfway point at Auchtertyre farm. Not much recollection of this stage except that the last 5 km section is a steep climb into woods after Bogle Glen (75km) above Crianlarich and then a long descent down towards the road crossing of the A82 a bit before the farm. The fairly steep descents at this stage are a real challenge to your quad muscles.

I have said previously that the WHW Race is a tale of two races and the change happens at Auchtertyre Farm (80km, 1:51pm). A new support crew and from now on having a support runner accompanying me for pace, conversation and general companionship along the way all go to give a different feel to the race. It's also a little over halfway so there is a psychological effect as well. So Angus, Don and Martin greeted me in the field at Auchtertyre and after a little food and drink I set off with Don who would be my companion to Bridge of Orchy.

Food / nutrition is important but after 12 hours running the body will prioritise blood flow to the legs. The stomach and gut get less blood flow and slow down. It's a real predicament as I find nausea starts to also creep in. Psychologically you believe that you need food but the body isn't interested. My strategy throughout was to use unflavoured Tailwind as my drink as much as possible – a calorie and electrolyte fluid that is easy on the gut. Nearly all my previous runs I had had problems with cramp and so tried to mitigate this by having a little tonic water and also carrying my 'secret weapon' – a small phial of pickle juice, said to work wonders in reducing cramps. Whether they worked or it was the placebo effect the cramps were kept at bay.

After a few km with Don I was trying to be creative with my food choices and try and absorb as much calories as possible before things got harder. So it was that I asked Don if he could kindly run ahead of me and get some plain vanilla ice cream and a Mars bar in Tyndrum. He duly obliged and rejoined me with these goodies as I passed through Tyndrum. The ice cream was especially delicious. It perked me up a bit and was able to enjoy some pleasant chatter as we progressed largely paralleling the railway line. A few km south of Bridge of Orchy we caught up with a woman who was in trouble. She was in a lot of pain and was 'planning' to give up at B of O. Don tried to encourage her otherwise and then he sprinted on ahead to B of O with instructions to stay with her. This was an odd experience as I had been going faster and inconsiderately felt cheated



Bridge of Orchy

slowing down. Don had been much more compassionate and understanding. Despite my selfishness I hope I was of some help. Actually the slower pace was refreshing to me so that on arrival in Bridge of Orchy (96km, 4:41pm) I was a bit more energised than I would have been otherwise.

Angus and Martin were there and after some strawberries proceeded on with Martin who would now accompany me to Glencoe. Weather had continued to be good up to this point. Some 4 km after B of O by tradition you come to the 100km mark and are met by Murdo McEwan who presents you with a jelly baby to eat. Sometimes there is a piper or other music but just Murdo on his own this year. It's not all a bit of fun and in fact serves as a check on various aspects of the runners condition. This time he gave a warning that the weather was worsening and to dress warm. And so it was to prove.

There is a beautiful descent to the remote hamlet of Inveroran. The views are stunning and in the late afternoon light had a magical quality to it. We had pre-arranged to meet Angus and Martin here near the end of the single track dead end road. This was good as I put on more clothing in the freshening winds and increasing rain. Moving on we proceeded on General Wade's road and on to Rannoch Moor. Some stunning rainbows and the silent hills surrounding as sentinels. I have always experienced the moor as a 'big sky' experience.

Meanwhile Martin trying faithfully to get me to pick up and sustain pace. After what seems like ages this long straight and slow ascent eventually summits and you start to sense you will soon start bearing left for a turn into Glencoe.

The rain and wind are steady now and almost imperceptibly I am feeling more chilled around the torso. As with each stage of this long run my focus was just the next point of the race. You cannot entertain mentally the full distance. I can only sustain the short term goal of the next checkpoint. Anything else is energy sapping physically and mentally. At last we reached the shoulder that bears left round to the Glencoe Ski Centre arriving there at 7:44pm (114 km). It was great to see Elisabeth who had motored up that afternoon. She would be with the team for the rest of the route. By this point the weather conditions were dire with strong winds, rain and very chilly. My cherished thought of up to a 15 min refreshing break was not to be. Instead decisions. One thought was to go into the very welcoming café.



Arrival Glencoe

There were two dangers inherent in this. I would get comfortable, fall asleep and then self pity about how far it was to go, how tired I was etc. and time would slip away very quickly. Decided not to risk this. Second was to change in car park into warm clothing. I thought I would strip to my waist and put on warm clothing. As I started to do this I was shaking with the cold and Dr. McKee sternly and wisely said that I should not strip off and instead put on clothes on top of the cold, wet ones. Question was what was best suited? Elisabeth then said to put on my down filled (feather filled) jacket under my rain jacket, something I would never think of running with. This turned out to save the day. I now had 5 layers on top but it was the down that stopped the wind and rain from chilling me further.

And so Don and I set off down the hill from the ski centre and on to the next and most challenging stage of the adventure. I also re- started by GPS watch as wanted to know how the remaining distance (about 42km) was 'progressing'.

Earlier I mentioned that nausea was a common issue for me. Another is dizziness and visual problems. Each time they start at the same stage of the race and this one was no different. I was now finding it difficult to focus visually on the largely rocky terrain and was losing my balance. Several km after the ski centre you reach Altnafeadh and then turn right to ascend the devil's staircase. For me it has always been gruelling trying to fight the twin issues of dizziness and nausea with fatigue and cold. As I think I've mentioned in the past I now understand that when faced with deep cold and tiredness it is the latter that the body craves more. In a previous race I was so tired that I wanted to lie down in a stream for rest. This lack of judgement means it is a mercy to have Don with me to impart sense to the occasion. He did allow me to sit for a few seconds on a rock now and then. Another experience from previously was the ability to micro sleep i.e take a few secs sleep. In the past I did this by sitting for a short time. This time I sensed I actually nodded off briefly while actually moving.



At the summit of Devil's staircase I thought my hallucinations were becoming especially vivid. It must have been true though because Don saw it too and here is the picture. Two tents constituted an unmanned honesty tuck shop respectfully requesting £1.50 for drinks!!

It was starting to darken on the long descent to Kinlochleven. All that height gained over the Staircase was now going to be lost as you descend to sea level. Arriving at the Leisure Centre in Kinlochleven (129km, 11:48pm) it was a relief to sink into a chair after a weight check and brief chat with medic. Her cure for dizziness and nausea was to give me some tonic water - it seemed to be a cure all! Not much appetite for anything but at least the midges were not out. Elisabeth encouraged me to brush my teeth which I duly did. Once again this time off into the cold, dark and windy night to do the last ascent of the race, up the Lairig Mhor. Martin was now my companion and Don getting a well-earned rest. As usual as we levelled off into the valley floor we were met by the

Wilderness Response team who cheerily greeted you with offers of juice. Grateful for them and literally scores of other people who were out on moors and hill tops in inhospitable weather for many hours checking on our well-being.

As we traversed the valley I was looking forward to Lundavra, the mid-point between Kinlochleven and Fort William. There is traditionally a bonfire and I was not to be disappointed. How they kept it alight in the constant rain was amazing. Angus had faithfully arrived having driven along the single track road along with Don. Both Don and Martin would now accompany me for the remaining 11km or so. It was good of them as one of them could easily have taken a sleep. Light was now in the sky and also in our hearts. The end was in sight! The thought of the end seemed to make time go a bit quicker and before too long we glimpsed Glen Nevis and were at the top of the fire road that leads down the valley into Fort William. As has been my habit by this time I was moaning about my general state and getting little sympathy from Don and Martin. As we made the gentle descent another runner and his support crew passed us telling us to get a move on. This prompted Martin to say that these last 4 km I should start overtaking people! And so it was that I proceeded to slowly overtake the guy we had just passed much to his support runner's chagrin. I then overtook two more! Thank you, Martin, for gaining me 3 places though have to admit in the moment I did not appreciate the effort involved.



The last km!



A bit weary but glad for a seat

50 metres from final destination Elisabeth garlanded me with flowers she had arranged and then suddenly I had arrived at the decidedly unromantic doors of the Fort William Leisure centre and the finish! It had taken approx. 154km and 28 hours 27 mins and 46 secs. later. A half hour slumped in a chair sipping tea and it was off to a most welcome shower. Already the nausea was disappearing and my appetite was rapidly returning. Angus's advice that the only cure for these ailments was to stop running proved right.

Then it was off to the Alexandra hotel for a very welcome, hearty breakfast buffet with team and then a deep rest in their lounge before off to get that 6th goblet!

This has been a team effort and despite the bad weather conditions in the latter stages everyone seemed upbeat right to the end. Martin's cheeky challenge in the last 30 mins to start 'reeling in' the people in front of me gained me 3 places!! Angus's cheerful greetings at checkpoints and elsewhere and his sage advice at Glencoe not to 'strip off' to put on warm clothing when my body was already chilled. Then Elisabeth's inspired suggestion that I beat the chill by running with my down jacket. Don's empathetic running

presence at some low points physically. For James and Shirley cheerfully participating in something that was very new to them and then taking me smoothly through the first part of race like veterans.



Post-race breakfast



Getting that goblet

I would also like to thank the race organisers, committee and many other volunteers led ably by the race director Ian Beattie. They all give much time and effort to make it possible for us to have 'fun' out on the trail.

Any rigours involved in completing such a run are temporary. Indeed the opportunity to do such runs are a by-product of relative health, fitness and wealth. It cannot be compared to the long-term sufferings and deprivation that poverty brings. It is a privilege to sponsor a project that will benefit the poor and disadvantaged. Jesus said it is more blessed to give than receive. Many of us receive so much.

A huge thank you to all those who have already given to the aforementioned project in Pakistan with Starfish Asia. Till end of Sept 2017 you can contribute at uk.virginmoneygiving.com/agrant where there are more details including the 2nd run I hope to do at end of the summer in the alps for same project. Also later at starfishasia.com

Allan Grant 30 June 2017

28:27:46 - 110 out of 159 finishers (209 starters)