



West Highland Way Race 2017

DEREK FISH

The 2017 West Highland Way race would start at 1am in Milngavie on the 24th of June. I was hoping to finish on the same day in Fort William some 96 miles later. In reality the journey to Fort William started much earlier although not quite as planned. In November 2016 after suffering months of toe pain I had an operation to remove arthritis from my big toe. The surgeon claimed I would be back running in 6 weeks but, in reality, it took 10 meaning I had Christmas and New Year to eat, drink and generally get fatter and less fitter. A first run back in the new year resulted in my foot being in agony and getting a row from the surgeon when he found out I had done 9 miles up and down Ben Venue and not the 1 mile on the treadmill he recommended. I tried to explain that nobody runs for only 1 mile and certainly not on the treadmill but he was having none of it.

Armed with a telling off I started again with a compromise (3 miles on the treadmill) mid January and resumed full training at the end of the month. I contacted **Paul Giblin** who had been coaching me for around 15 months and announced I was ready to go. Training went poorly to start with however as the mileage and intensity of the sessions increased I felt some resemblance of fitness return. Some awesome long days in the mountains helped and I bagged quite a few Munros around Glen Tilt, Lochnagar, Carn Mairig and had a particularly memorable day running up An Sgarsoch and Carn an Fhidhleir with **Jonathan Millar** who would go on to win the Skye Ultra. Mixed in with the hill runs I tried to get onto the West Highland way as much as possible. There are days when the weather can only be described as 'character building' and none more so than a solo run from Bridge of Orchy to Fort William. The rain lashed down, the wind howled and I only met 1 other person who was daft enough to be out running. Turns out the Bermuda shorts dude was quite handy at the whole West Highland Way thing!!!

I had booked in for my usual Devilla 15k trail race in February, Alloa half marathon in April and instead of the Highland Fling I opted for the Kielder 100k in early April. I withdrew from all 3 races as my form was terrible and I felt that concentrating on my A race was more important than these. The only race I ran was just over two weeks before the WHW race at the Giffnock North Rouken Glen 10k. The race was on a particularly wet and wild Thursday night and came at the end of one of the toughest blocks of training I had done. My mate from school who is a member of the club messaged me to say it was quite hilly too so it came as a surprise when I took a PB by 13 seconds. This lifted my spirits and looking at my mileage on Strava showed that I had ran 3 miles more to the end of May than 2016 but also I had an extra 35000 ft of

climbing in there. Looking back I had only missed 3 sessions of my coaching program in 5 months. I had some great solo days and some fantastic days with great company from friends in some of the most amazing places. Thanks to all my training buddies.

Race day soon came around and after stuffing my face all day I collected the support team and headed to Milngavie at around 10pm. Last year it was nervous excitement at the start line and whilst I was nervous it was more apprehension knowing what was ahead. I tried to get 30 minutes lying down in the van to compose myself and my thoughts went back to collecting last years goblet. I tried to keep this thought at the front of my mind all throughout the race. The race briefing came and went and very soon we were off. I ran the first 8 or 9 miles with **Joanna Murphy** my fellow Carnegie club mate and a regular partner in crime for long runs. I apologised to the guys behind us for her flatulence once or twice although I am sure they blamed me. The miles flew by and the banter was good and we were joined by Dave Andrews. I felt the pace was a bit too quick for me and backed off a bit letting Jo head off. Jo was to go on and PB by over 4 hours and finish 3rd female. To be honest nothing amazes me with her running and it was no surprise when I found out she had a podium spot and smashed her A time by over an hour.

Conic appeared in the morning gloom and I felt refreshed and eager to get into Balmaha and meet my support team. My stomach had started to cramp going up Conic and I held on until after the check point for a luxury toilet at the oak tree. My crew consisted of my wife **Rona**, daughter Lucy as well as **Kat Simms** who's day job is a physio and **Iona**. Iona was to be my support runner and I have probably ran more miles with her than anyone else over the past 3 years. Rona and Kat had both crewed last year and Iona had ran the race so everyone knew what was expected. The checkpoint was all set out perfect and after chipping in I got fresh flasks, topped up the food, got skooshed with smidge, replaced the head torch with a visor and a quick kiss from Lucy I was on my way. I stopped at the oak tree to use the loo and paced the floor waiting for someone to vacate. Despite the stomach cramps and a few facial expressions there was nothing happening and I left rather sheepishly.

The trail to Rowerdennan was a well known part of the route for me. I used the small climbs to nibble at flapjacks and get some powerade down. The stomach pains intensified and I hoped I could hold off to Rowerdennan. I arrived around 6 minutes down on last years time and considering I had wasted around 5 minutes at the oak tree I didn't feel too bad. I had a similar toilet outcome at RD and left feeling a bit perplexed. Inversnaid soon arrived after tackling the lovely low path. After a hug from Ruth I topped up powerade and snacks from my drop bag and I headed out to tackle the technical section, my least favourite part of the route. Despite the stomach pains I moved well and actually recorded a PR (according to Strava) to Beinglas. This section was mostly spent on my own and it was great to see Dave Scott out at Dario's post who snapped a picture of me. I planned a quick turn around at Beinglass and that's what I got. I overtook **Clark Findlay** at the checkpoint who had passed me earlier and was then promptly passed by him again. My cramps intensified over this section and I had to stop a couple of times until they eased off. I ducked under the low bridge and walked up the path to cow poo alley. I was passed by quite a few

runners here and felt quite low. I even thought about making myself sick to see if that would help relieve the pain. Coo poo alley was thick as usual and the roller coaster seemed a lot tougher than on my training runs.

I arrived in Auchtertyre feeling quite low and I think my crew sensed this. I changed my top, topped up my powerade and headed to Tyndrum asking for a cold lemonade. I veered to the toilet at the green welly and again left 'empty handed'. It was there I met Avril who on reflexion saved my race. Avril was supporting her partner Paul Foster and was a fellow Carnegie Harrier. She suggested ditching the electrolytes and salt and stick to water and that might help. By Bridge of Orchy I was 18 minutes down on last year, felt terrible and I asked Iona to support run with me as I hoped it would lift my spirits. There was a panic in my mind that if this didn't get any better I may DNF especially with the poor weather being forecast. I trudged out of B of O and burped around 100 times on the climb up jelly baby hill. I took a Jelly baby (red) from Murdo and told him I hoped it made me sick as my guts were killing me. I'm not sure it was taken in the spirit it was intended.

My memory of the Drovers road and Rannoch moor was of sunshine, heat and thirst from 2016. This year it will be of rain and 2 types of wind. The second type was gusting almost blowing me off the trails at times. My waterproof jacket was on one minute and off shortly after only to return again. The showers were very heavy and looked like they could be on for the day as the sky blackened. I was passed by **Scott Wilson** and his support runners on the big climb up to Glencoe. It was then that I gave myself a talking to as I had been around 30 minutes ahead of him at Beinglas. I told Iona to pick up the pace and try to keep him in sight. When I say pick up the pace I meant 'start running'. It was getting cold and she duly obliged more out of self preservation. We kept them within 100 yards and they were cracking on at a fantastic pace. Scott looked really strong and had a great first WHW race. I managed to close the gap on the way down into Glencoe running really hard. The legs felt great and after drinking a lot of water the stomach started to feel better.

We were met at Glencoe by **Lorna McMillan** who advised us to change into warm dry clothes as word ahead was that the weather was brutal. I changed into a base layer of Merino wool, a technical top and dry jacket. I also added a thicker woolly hat and donned the seal skin gloves. I was warm, reasonably dry and ready to run. The run down the road was quick and the legs felt like they were flowing nicely. We ran all the way past the Kingshouse and turned the corner to be met with a full on head wind. The rain was at its wildest here too. We trudged upwards towards the Devils Staircase. I finally caught up with a few people who had passed me earlier. Everyone was so wrapped up it was difficult to tell who it was. We all grunted encouraging grunts no doubt thinking the same thoughts; 'utter madness'. The hike up the devils was slow and painful. Iona kept checking behind to say Scott was closing in. The top was finally reached and I composed myself for the run into KLL. I told Iona to go for it, my legs felt great and she plotted her way down the technical slippery boulders. I trusted her route choice entirely and told her to go even faster as I didn't want to run too close. We passed more people closing in on them at speed and passing by with

a burst. The landrover track appeared and the worst of the terrain was past so we picked up the pace more.

Kinlochleven (aka Brigadoon) appeared eventually and I arrived in good spirits despite the weather. I had picked up 9 places on that section, felt great and had actually clocked the 9th fastest time of the day on that section. I was met by Kat, got weighed in and was informed a full kit check was happening. As my crew braved the weather to gather my waterproof trousers I took the time to finally do the toilet. The relief was awesome. I bombed out of KLL in good spirits.

The climb up out of KLL is pretty steep and tough going. I kept the head down and worked off Iona's pace. As soon as we got to the top we ran the flats and downs and hiked the ups. At times the wind was so strong it felt we weren't getting anywhere. Again I passed 4 other runners and their crews up to Lundarva and was feeling pretty strong. In weather conditions like these you really appreciate the experience of the marshals. The weather was at its worst and I could imagine their judgement would be needed to allow people to continue through the night. Jeff Smith was huddled in his van with Patricia and after a quick hug (with Patricia) and a swig of Irn Bru we were on our way. On we continued into the wind and rain. I don't think I've ever ran as hard as I did along this section. I was hurting and breathing hard but the legs felt great. I was in a zone of running I don't think I had ever been in before and I pushed on harder still when another couple of runners came into sight. I passed the first pair and caught up to the second pair just as they were leaving the final outpost! I am not sure who they were as they were all wrapped up but they were tough to catch and tried to stay with me into where the forest had been chopped. I ran like a man possessed and finally reached the last small climb up to the fire track road.

My support runner stopped for a pee and I pushed on clocking a 9 min mile in the process. She ran a 7:15 trying to catch me. Not bad after 33 miles Iona 😊;-) I passed a crew member walking up to meet his runner and asked if anyone else was close. The reply I got was music to my ears. "there's a runner a couple of hundred yards ahead and you're moving way faster". Spurred on I pushed around another corner and spotted them. I quickly moved past and looked forward to the braveheart car park and the final mile. My crew was waiting at the car park and I chucked them my jacket gloves and hat as by now I was roasting. As I hit the 30 mile limit sign I spotted another runner ahead walking with two crew. We tried to sneak up unaware but my passing crew waving and tooting kind of gave the game away. To be fair to David Inverarity he put on the after burners and finished over a minute ahead.

The leisure centre sneaks up on you all of a sudden and I turned into the car park absolutely spent. I chipped in then doubled over desperately needing a seat. It's a feature of every ultra I do that as soon as I stop I feel like either passing out or being sick. This time I felt like both as I made my way indoors. Looking for a spare seat I almost keeled over and as soon as I sat down I was told I had to get weighed in. I started to go blurry and couldn't move. Gayle brought me a cracking cup of tea and after 5 minutes I was able to get up and get onto the scales. I was greeted by Kristin, Steven and Jonny who had crewed for Jo. I couldn't believe how well she had done....well to be honest I could as she is just bloody awesome. It was

great to see the Carnegie crew hanging about welcoming me in. I maybe didn't look like I appreciated it at the time but I really did.

I received my timing splits and realised I had finished 26th overall and a new PB of 21:41:31. Elated we returned to our digs where I squeezed my 6'3" frame into about a 3ft bath, started on a cold beer and promptly fell asleep in the bath. I fully appreciate hand rails now! The prize giving is always a great event and a chance to catch up and hear everyones stories. It was great to see Scott, Clark and **Sharon** get their first goblets and I was super happy for **Graeme Reid** and his time this year as well as Jo's podium placing. Finally what can I say about Rob's time which was simply unbelievable.

Big massive thanks to Ian, John K, Adrian, Sean and all the other marshals I met along the way. It was on days like this that you really appreciate their hard work, experience and dedication. My training partners over the months leading up have motivated, inspired and encouraged me and without them I wouldn't have trained so hard. To coach Paul you almost broke me but built me up stronger each time. TeamPyllon you guys are inspiring, encouraging and a bit crazy (in a good way). To all the runners I met along the Way well done on braving those conditions and getting your goblet. To my crew I absolutely love you guys. See you all next year (fingers crossed).