

2017 West Highland Way Report

Neil MacRitchie

Anyway, West Highland Way race number 13.... Lucky for some?

Now I'm not superstitious.... Not even when a long serving back up crew member had to pull out with a few days to go (top man – off to work with Unicef in sub-saharan Africa..... couldn't really find fault with him there).... Then on Friday, less than 24 hours before the race, when a real hero for me, who had lead 11 of my 12 previous teams and knows everything there is to know about WHWR back-up crew art, had to pull out due to family illness.... Then when I woke up on the Friday with a throat that felt like broken glass and a cough that suggested I shouldn't be about to run 95 miles into the forecast heavy rain and strong winds (medical disclaimer – it is not sensible and I would not advise anyone to partake in vigorous physical exercise while under the influence of a respiratory virus.... please do as I say and not as I do..... seriously!)..... surely there isn't anything to this superstitious 13 thing?

Anyway with a slightly revised crew in place, [Scott](#) with one previous race came through to Milngavie for registration with crew virgin Colin to join us shortly afterwards. Registration is fantastic.... Even someone as antisocial and interpersonally stunted as myself suddenly feels like I know half the world; it's great. From [Sandra](#) pointing to her watch because its ten to midnight (didn't she realise that's the earliest I've registered in years) to [Finbar's](#) customary greeting ("Oh no, not you again....") and oh so many great folk with a smile and a greeting... everyone seems to know your name; apologies that I don't always know them back.

As we start running it's dry! And nice! And I feel OK! Meet a handful of legends (the genuinely inspirational ones like [Fiona](#), [Bob](#), and so many many more) along the way. Things are fine till the first climbs and suddenly I feel more breathless than I should; perhaps this virus isn't just a sniffle. Anyway without thinking really the plan changes, slowly walk up the hills as quickly as my breathing will allow, and gently jog the rest. Gradually get passed by more and more runners, but still moving forwards and that's what counts – I had a time in mind but genuinely without thinking couldn't care less that it's not going to happen. Realise that by Conic Hill (where the machine that is [John K](#) powers past me) so no point spending next 75 miles worrying about it. It's strange, I normally over think things, but this time didn't doubt that I would finish, knew it would be slow, and just bit off one section at a time (I know that's a cliché, but for once it worked for me).

Up Loch Lomondside is a mixture of running bits with others and having a bleather, and a bit of time to enjoy my own company. By Beinglas though I'm feeling feeble; more breathless yet I know there are folk far worse off than myself; MTFU goes through the mind, and I feebly try to. Not long after that the wonderful [Ellen](#) and [Norma](#) and friends saunter past me like they're out for a Sunday afternoon training run!.... Try briefly to catch them but feel so breathless after the short climb up after Carmyle cottage that I have to slow right down, the roller coaster at Ewich has much the same effect and I decide that I won't take a support runner at Auchtertyre (partly because they have a reduced team, and partly because I realise I'm going to struggle to talk more than a few words and move at same time).

The folly of that decision soon becomes apparent.... Approaching Tyndrum I'm staggering about the path beside the river. Really grateful to the ladies who passed me (sorry, know I know you, but forgot who it

was) and gave me the metaphorical kick up the derriere. Took some more fruit pastilles (2 bags of Fruit pastilles was the vast bulk of my calorific intake all race) and by Tyndrum I was buzzing. Heard that my good friend [Robert](#) had brought his kids up on a day trip to wave support and now I'm running up the hill from Tyndrum towards the railway line singing Kenneth McKellar's West Highland Way song (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXrkxLS0X3Y>). Didn't last long, but a good buzz seeing them all cheer on from the layby at the top of the hill.

Managed some beans at the dreich Bridge of Orchy (how does [Ada](#) manage to stalk me at so many checkpoints accusing me of mincing about at them??) then had Colin's company up Jelly Baby Hill top see Mr [Murdo](#) T. Magnificent. What a Man to spend the day up there supporting us right to the end of the field!

Short section then Colin became [Scott](#) at Victoria Bridge. Briefly managed to catch record breaking [Norma](#), but my chat was enough to power her up the hills faster than I could manage. Frustrating crossing Rannoch; able to jog the flats and downhills faster than many around me, but just not able to get the puff to do the uphill.

Dark can't be far off at Glencoe so straight through with a plan to cover a few more miles in daylight then meet crew for food before the climb. Any my usual curse strikes... it gets dark and I need to sleep. Grabbed 15 minutes and then tried to eat some soup, which quickly comes back up... great. Anyway off onto the Devils Staircase and I finally decide that for the first time since 2004 at the same place it's time to put waterproof trousers over my shorts, and boy was I glad I did. I was also glad that I put a bivvy bag in my backpack and extra jackets etc.... that was a bit scary up there. I'm sure it was pretty awful all day, but at that time the wind was so high I had to hold onto my head torch on several occasions to stop it blowing off my napper. It wouldn't have taken long to come to harm if something happened and you ended up immobilised in those conditions. Now I realise most folk that read this will be over and in their beds by this time of night, but just incase any future plodder happens to chance upon this.... please take enough gear to look after yourself up there. Eventually Kinlochleven approaches; Colin, despite being the newby in the team is a consummate professional and supported me hugely through the dark, such that I never once suggested 'just a wee lie down at the side of the path' as I am (allegedly) occasionally prone to doing.

Got to KLL and was expecting to be swiftly booted out again by the wonderful [Karen](#), [Dod](#) and [Julie](#) and co (great to see you all looking so great), and yet they took sympathy on me and offered me a mattress.... I must have looked awful!

Anyway it's now daylight, throat feels a bit better (support runners start complaining that I'm chatting more!), still breathless on the climbs but Scott is encouraging and supportive and I slowly tick off the Lairig Mhor (so sorry to see [Andy](#) retracing his steps – really hope I'm there to cheer him joining the 10 club when he chooses to), looking forward to seeing the A Team just before the first ruin at 84 miles; I'm busy telling Scott how great [Jeff](#) and [Patricia](#) are, and to be nice to Maisie..... and they are all fast asleep.

Well deserved I'm sure after a night up there guiding lost souls.... Thanks for the cup of cola guys; it went down a treat! And for being there for us if we needed you. And then the last section; and finally for the first time since Saturday morning I feel like I'm back in a running event (probably because it's mostly

downhill!) and before you know it the Fort is in sight. Rain starts pouring but I'm not stopping to put waterproofs back on.... I've got a date with the Leisure Centre... and suddenly I feel more alive than I feel the rest of the year again, and there's all the (other) heroes at the end, folk that arrange the whole event like Ian and Adrian and are up longer than most of the runners, and just as importantly those who look after us when things go wrong like Finbar (looks at watch... and a disapproving glance....) and Becks and so so so many others. The West Highland Way race has great runners and supporters and above all a great crew, so many thanks to them all. Apologies to anyone I've missed in the above, was getting too long.... and sorry if I've remembered anyone somewhere that they weren't!

So many friends and better runners than me didn't quite make it this year, hope you're soon on the mend and feeling better and back there in the future.

But special thanks to my team, those who could make it and those who couldn't; you're all so generous and special and I appreciate it far more than I can ever articulate.

At the end I was left with only 3 questions.

1. How is it humanly possible to run as fast as some of the heroes did? Amazing! That said, I've huge admiration for all the finishers, especially the first 159 of them
2. How long will "never again" last this time? (answer till approximately Tuesday night, a good 36 hours longer than normal... I must be getting old/ soft)
3. So was 13 unlucky?... not for me. Didn't go as I had planned, but I had a really memorable and life affirming weekend surrounded by some of the best folk I could ever hope to be. Can't think of a better way to mark my 100th ultramarathon completion.