

## Neil Ramsay – West Highland Way Race – June 2017

Cast (in order of appearance):

Alan McDonald	Core Crew	Driver & Fixer
Dave Hanna	Core Crew	Director of Operations & Support Runner (3) KLL-FTW
Ross Cruikshanks	'Day'tripper	Support Runner (1) Auch-GLC
Pete Baillie	'Day'tripper	Support Runner (1) Auch-GLC
Barry Lovern	'Day'tripper	Support Runner (2) GLC-KLL
Alistair Robinson	'Day'tripper	Support Runner (2) GLC-KLL

**2016.** Following a great weekend crewing for Dave I was considering entering the WHW race. After the 2016 event only around 1,000 people had completed the race – this seemed a very small number – here was an opportunity to do something exceptional. I entered the ballot and was offered a place. It was around then (December) I started working my way through the archive of WHW Podcasts. Although each runner will have individual preferences and opinions consideration of the issues raised (pace, planning, kit, nutrition, training, targets) was really useful and I would highly recommend these podcasts to any prospective WHW runners. This target will differ for every individual and I only mean this in personal terms; for me a credible WHW 'run' would be up to 30 hours, beyond this a finish would be more of an endurance than a running achievement. I set myself a personally ambitious 24 hour target, based on my 2016 Fling (10:57), and with further training, it was achievable.

**2017.** With the excesses of Christmas and New Year behind me it was time to start clocking up some miles on the trail; off I went to the January training weekend at the Oak Tree, Balmaha. I managed to leave my trainers at home and ended up buying new shoes in Glasgow before returning hours late to Balmaha and putting in a pitiful 14 mile run. Myself, and fellow 'trainees' made merry at the bar that evening – I was somewhat drunk and disorderly, leaving the training weekend feeling considerably less fit than when I had eventually arrived. Early February I was lucky in a third ballot, being offered a place in the Devil - having already secured Fling and WHW entry the triple was on. Training did not feel good owing to a long standing back problem and I was disappointed in my Fling time (11:50). I completed some valuable back to back weekenders and long runs but accept that my regular weekly mileage was too low. In addition to running I maintained my routine of British Military Fitness circuit and running classes, regular swimming and occasional pilates.

**Before.** I tapered down running my last long run 2<sup>nd</sup> June and resting completely for just over a week prior to the race, I was carrying a knee injury but it was not severe and I hoped that with rest and ice this would not result in a DNS. I had Friday off and spent the morning preparing kit and food. I went to bed ~15:00 and intended to sleep until 20:00 – I could not sleep but hoped the rest had done me some good. After dinner I drove to Alan's where he took over driving duties. We arrived in Milngavie ~23:30, put in a dropbag for Inversnaid and registered. Asked how I was feeling by WHW First Lady Sandra I said I was terrified, she told me not to be daft and that she would not be tolerating any such talk at whichever checkpoints she would deign to visit. It felt no time at all since I was in this hall collecting Dave's weigh-in card and readying him to go one year ago – I wished I was driving again instead of running it. There is no fun like organised fun – Alan and I met Dave over at the car (he had

come by train with Myv) where I issued them their clipboard with directions, notes and the masterplan spreadsheet. We ran through food, kit and the plan – I knew Dave and Alan would take care of everything and felt relaxed about all things ‘off trail’. We took a few pictures, spoke to friends and familiar faces and listened to Ian (RD) and Sean (Safety) give the race brief, warning us “there will be weather”. Ian also spoke about the special achievement of being a goblet earning WHW finisher – something I remembered and focused on later when trudging towards Fort William.



**During.** 01:00 and we were off into the night.

Milngavie – Balmaha. About half way to Drymen my knee was uncomfortable but not especially painful – I had taken paracetamol before starting for my back so perhaps this was keeping a lid on things. Just before Drymen Fraser McCoull overtook me – I had no business seeing the likes of racing snake Fraser but we had a quick chat and Fraser explained that he was running to heartbeat and was actually slightly ahead of his pacing. I arrived in Drymen 5 minutes behind schedule, this was not a worry but I was concerned at how tired I felt, 12 gentle miles in and I could have stopped now and headed home, how could I manage another 83? I jogged on towards Conic, my knee had worsened and I lost another couple of minutes walking some runnable terrain. I walked all the way up Conic – as the path tops out and Loch Lomond opens up ahead it is a stunning view but I did not want to start halting for pictures and carried on. I made a relatively reserved decent into Balmaha – conscious of aggravating my knee and doing any other damage so early on. I ran in and my crew were waiting with porridge and coffee which was great – they had managed some rest and were in good spirits, there was a breeze and the midges were not out in force. Dave asked how painful my knee was out of 10, I reckoned a 6. Realistically I probably should not have started but being lucky enough to have a place and having trained and planned for this event I really wanted to push on, I could cope with a 6. I took a bottle of water and was sent on my way, roughly 10 minutes behind schedule.

Balmaha – Rowardennan. I don't like running with a pack and carry as little as possible – I had handed my pack in at Balmaha and crew were going to restock and return it to me at Rowardennan. Whilst restocking my pack Dave came across a foil blanket, which is always in there – fearing this meant I did not have mandatory kit (I had another blanket in my jacket) the crew drove slowly towards Rowardennan trying to spot me – seeing me climbing away after one of the brief road stretches Dave was able to shout asking about the blanket – I assured him I had one and they drove on – this was one of many instances of my crew looking after me very well. I dropped another 10 minutes to Rowardennan where I had a coke and took my restocked pack, I graded my knee at a 7 – again feeling that having so little 'run' left in me this early on was not good – I tried to focus on only the next checkpoint and nothing beyond.

Rowardennan – Beinglas. Shortly after the checkpoint there is a long climb which I used to eat and drink before jogging on to the low road. This is, as many have said, more in keeping with the WHW but I found it considerably slower than the high (Fling) route. Although I was relatively slow into Inversnaid nothing was worsening and I was feeling okay. I walked through Inversnaid consuming my dropbag contents before getting on to the technical loch side path. The familiar boulders, trees, gates, bridges and the ladder came and went – getting this tricky section behind me felt good – I jogged on, nearing Beinglas, and was sorry to see John 'podcast' Kynaston sitting at the side of the path encouraging runners - I had followed John's build up to the race in his podcasts and knew he had been well prepared but had an injury which forced him to stop. John's behaviour in switching to 'supporter' typifies the positive atmosphere and camaraderie evident throughout this event. It was great getting in to Beinglas – I was now 50 minutes behind schedule but feeling fairly positive. I declined all of the food and gels Dave offered but left with a well stocked pack.

Beinglas – Auchtertyre. I was guilty of walking some runnable stuff here, struggling to keep up any sort of rhythm. On one of the WHW podcasts John said the gate at the Crainlarich spur before the woods, pre-rollercoaster, was halfway, so passing here was an encouraging point although this also meant I had to repeat the mileage I had just done in an increasingly impaired state. My knee was doing a lot of complaining – I pointed out, aloud, that I had heard its complaints but was busy with a race at the moment for which I had paid, trained and organised and therefore these complaints would have to wait. Jogging in to Auchtertyre Alan Roberston was driving out – he told outright lies saying I was looking fresh. I was weighed here – a minor reduction, so I thought I must be eating and drinking okay. I think it was here I first applied freeze cream to my knee – this did help but the benefit was always pretty short-lived. From here onwards I was allowed support runners, Ross and Pete had joined the crew to accompany me for the next 20 miles to Glencoe, I was topped up with supplies and ran out with Pete.

Auchtertyre – Bridge of Orchy. Pete and I jogged out and Ross caught us shortly after the underpass with a bottle of Lucozade which Dave had insisted I was made to drink immediately. I had been unsure about having support runners; I felt a bit embarrassed about dragging people out and being the centre of the weekend, shamed by the pace I would be moving at and worried that I would be intolerably grumpy and difficult – despite all of those concerns coming to fruition I got a great boost from the company and am certain I could not have finished without support. Passing ‘By the Way’ (Fling finish) there was no; piper, red carpet, beer, baked potato, ice cream, shower or massage, I reluctantly settled for some haribo and water. We saw the crew again at Brodies but kept going. If Pete and Ross were frustrated by my pace and attitude they kept this to themselves – chatting and keeping me moving. Arriving at B.O.O now 90 minutes behind schedule the remainder of my crew, Barry and Alistair had turned up so I had quite the entourage as I was sent to the physio marshal who was an intolerably cheery guy. Having my knee looked at meant I was allowed to sit in a chair – a treat and something Dave would not have allowed in any other circumstances. The marshal (I didn’t catch his name – lets call him Chirpy) was great, very positive and encouraging despite my being equally negative. To everyone’s great amusement Chirpy shaved my leg to apply tape- I was happy with any treatment that kept me seated for as long as possible. Knee taped and supplies replenished we set off.

Bridge of Orchy - Glencoe. Climbing to the top of Jelly Baby hill Murdo asked which of us was racing – stretching descriptive truth and credibility to breaking point Pete said that I was ‘the athlete’, I was duly issued with a jelly baby and we descended to Inveroran. I like this section and thought my planned split was realistic (2:35), it took about an hour longer, the weather was horrendous and we made slow progress walking (and a slow walk at that) all but the occasional downhill. Ross pointed out a rainbow – good weather was mocking us from afar. The wind picked up and I was cold, wet, struggling along and thoroughly miserable - without Ross and Pete I really would have been in danger, their patience and positivity got me to Glencoe. Reaching the checkpoint marshal Lorna advised I get into the café and warm up; Dave appeared and herded me over to the toilets where I dried off and changed everything, including trainers, and added layers. I headed out; Barry and Ali were ready to start running despite it being nearly 21:00 (3 hours behind schedule) – they would not be getting home at a civilised time but assured me they were raring to go – the fools. Dave noticed that despite the change of clothes I was still shivering so everyone was sent back into the café to warm up. As my gloves were soaked Dave took back the new gloves he had lent to Barry (who didn’t

bring gloves to Glencoe but had a bra to hand) and gave them to me. Impoverishing Barry in this way was repeated a couple of hours later when I deprived him of one of the two head-torches we had between three. Pete had intended to run back to his car in Tyndrum but the time and weather prevented this, he still got a few miles in being dropped off back at B.O.O – sorry Pete. After about 10 minutes indoors I was deemed fit to leave.

Glencoe – Kinlochleven. I managed a slow jog to Kingshouse with my fresh support crew doing an excellent job of providing chat and cheer (I was almost out of stock of both) – after Kingshouse (71+ miles in) Barry periodically, by which I mean every couple of minutes for the next hour or so, told me this was a far as I had ever run having surpassed the Great Glen Way distance. At the foot of the staircase Dave and Alan appeared – I think I had something to eat and drink before tackling the hill. Like me, the light was fading as we climbed, I was struggling to bend my knee and the incline was painful and seemed very slow – although we topped out in about half an hour which is okay. Ali was in the lead and had shouted back what sounded like something about a shop ahead; I was not in the mood for some fanciful nonsense about hill top retail. But indeed there were signs telling us we were approaching a shop, sure enough a couple of tents were erected at the top beside the cairn hosting an honesty shop. Standing at the top of the staircase it was almost dark and the weather deteriorated further as we started our long decent to Kinlochleven. I was probably at my most pathetic here and that is saying something – the path was a gushing stream and although Barry gave me one of the two torches stumbling downhill in darkness was hard going – Ali asked me if much of the WHW was like this or if the trail was better elsewhere – I considered the loch side, the Rannoch drove road and the path below our feet – I assured Ali the whole thing was equally horrible and not the sort of trail it is sensible to go running on. Rain should fall from the sky – it is a gravity thing surely – and yet somehow rain seemed to be vigorously attacking from all sides. We were passed by a few groups of runners with support, each said hello and asked how I was doing – my responses were generally a grunt of acknowledgment, this was my lowest ebb, I decided to stop at Kinlochleven. I thought about what I would say to the crew, hopefully they would all be happy to get to bed and not too disappointed in me. We were moving at ~1 mile per hour and I really thought I had no choice, at this rate I would be timed out – taking Dave (final support runner) up on to the Lairig Mor in this state would be unfair and irresponsible, I was too much of a liability. Once we hit the access road things improved, there was a break in the weather and we were walking at something nearing a normal walking pace. As we walked into Kinlochleven I felt relieved that the night and my race were drawing to a close. We were surprised to come across a marshal where the trail ends and town starts – I probably would have went in the wrong direction and am very grateful to all of the marshals and volunteers who were out looking after us at this ridiculous hour. We walked to the checkpoint, it was now 01:30 Sunday. There was an element of auto-pilot here and I cannot really explain what happened next. Julie Clarke was doing the weigh-in and called me over, admin taken care of I took a seat and was brought a coffee, I ate, applied some magic freeze gel and took another couple of paracetamol with red bull - sending poor Alan back and forth to the car as different things occurred to me. Somehow I completely forgot my decision to stop here – I did mention I thought time was getting tight but Dave laughed this off saying we had ages to make it – the crew had swung into action such that stopping was simply off the table, Dave was going to walk me to Fort William and I was going to finish the WHW.

Kinlochleven – Fort William. Dave and I walked about 10 yards before deciding that actually we were cold – Dave called Alan back and we took further layers from the car – Dave sacrificing some of his own warm kit for my benefit. After the false start we were off; I told Dave we would walk to the top of the climb out of town and from there I would do what I could to jog occasionally (never happened) and get this done. The walk up to from Kinlochleven was okay, food, drink, rest and medication at the last checkpoint seemed to give me almost an hour of feeling better and the ability to move at a reasonable walking pace. Night became day and the weather worsened – back to horizontal sleet and high winds. I had packed waterproof trousers not expecting to use them, I bought them a couple of years back to fulfil mandatory kit at the Pentland Skyline and had never actually tried them on. From Glencoe to Kinlochleven I had tucked and folded the waistband of my shorts over the loose waist of the trousers and this had held okay but now they kept falling down and I spent most of the Lairig Mor with my hands in my pockets trying to hold up these ludicrous oversized golfing waterproofs. I thought I had planned and prepared well but having untested kit which is simply not fit for purpose was idiotic. Seeing some other runners, the wilderpeople and Lundavra marshals felt good - people being around made everything feel less remote and surreal, the finish was getting close. Speaking of the surreal I did not have any hallucinations but through both nights shapes do take on odd forms; what appears to perhaps be a dog or building turn out on approach just to be a boulder or tree. After Lundavra (which we walked straight through taking some tray bake from a marshal) at the forest gate Dave and I discussed how far remained; depending who was right it was only 4 or 5 miles. Any incline or decline was painful and I was glad to reach the more comfortable terrain of the fire road. We walked in to Fort William, the end was nigh! Just before the leisure centre I tried to jog/run, I could not do it – no final sprint; I walked into the car park and across the line, 31:19:36, 145<sup>th</sup>/ 159 finishers / 210 starters. After a shower and massage Alan drove me to our accommodation where Dave had gone for a shower – It was now 10:00 and we had to check-out, I never made it into the room let alone sleeping there, grabbing 40 minutes nap in the car instead. At approximately 51 hours since waking on Friday this was the longest I have been awake.

**After.** The prize giving is great, Myv, Dave Hay and Fraser received their goblets – all having done really well in what was undoubtedly a tough year. Ian and Sean had told the truth at the brief; there certainly was weather and finishing did feel very special indeed. Knowing that I was 145<sup>th</sup> when Ian called 141<sup>st</sup> I started the now lengthy process of standing up from my seat, at 142<sup>nd</sup> being called I began the shuffle forward and by the time my name was called I had managed to reach the front and receive my goblet from Sean. On Monday evening after the race I went for curry and pints with the crew (minus Pete, plus Mark, Fraser, Myv & Barry's partner Ali who had believed his story about staying out all night to help a weakling off a mountain) – it was great getting together, my WHW weekend and finish was a group effort, I am enormously grateful to;

- The organisers, marshals, volunteers and fellow runners for making this happen.
- Pete and Ross who were only supposed to be out for an afternoon jog, thanks for putting up with me – at least there were no sun cream duties this year Ross.
- Barry and Ali who saw me through my worst, you both know my thoughts on nice people at races (cheery bastards) but I'll make an exception for you two, thanks.
- Dave who got me into this mess in the first place, looked after me throughout and done all but carry me to Fort William.
- Alan who looked after me and everyone else so well - making it all work – Thank you.

Writing just over three weeks since the race I have nerve damage in my big toes which I am told will repair/recover in a few months, my knee is much improved and I should be able to tackle the Devil in a couple of weeks, I am going to 'Run the Blades' (31 miles) this weekend as a slow and gentle return to ultra running and as preparation for the Devil.

**Next.** Although there were legitimate reasons for my race drifting so far from target (Knee, Weather, Sleep, Light – getting into a second night really slows progress) these excuses only compound the main reason which I must admit was lack of regular mileage, I had trained reasonably but was not on form /fit enough to get close to my 24 hour target. For these reasons I feel the WHW race is unfinished business, I have no choice but to enter the ballot in November and, hopefully, do it all again....

Thanks for reading this report, like my race it went on much longer than planned, Neil.

