

MY WHW ADVENTURE!

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The journey towards running the West Highland Way started last year with me taking part in The Devil of the Highlands 42 miles over the last part of course. It was the furthest I had ever run and it showed with bad cramp coming out of Kinlochleven around 30 miles, however I enjoyed the new challenge.

A lot of uncertainty at work with take overs new rotas etc had messed up my plans for London marathon so when entries opened for "The Triple Crown of Races" (unofficial for the 3 races along the WHW route) I decided to try my luck. All three races have criteria to allow entry with WHW being most stringent. Having completed all 3 now I totally agree with this process. None are for the recreational runner, however with proper preparation and loads of mental strength anyone CAN do them!

So the ballots came and went and I found myself successful in all 3 races...gulp! So In March started preparations with a warm up on D33, Aberdeen to Banchory and back. Turned out to be a reasonable run but did not respect the extra 7 miles, haha! Blew big time with 4 to go and relinquished 1st place to hobble to finish in 3rd, another lesson learned!

Next up was Highland Fling at end of April, this is 53 miles along WHW route from Milngavie to Tyndrum. Race went reasonably well and furthest distance I had run again. Main learning was craving for savoury food after 30 miles!

So onto The West Highland Way race itself. Looking back on it now my offshore rota is not really conducive to proper ultra training so adapted my treadmill sessions to add miles and speed! Theory being if I could knock out big miles at 6 min miling then I could slow down to 8.30/9 mins and see how long I lasted (very scientific I know!)

One of the quotes that stuck in my mind over the months running up to race was "Fail to prepare, prepare to fail" I think this is crucial and a lesson to all.

How do you train for 95 miles, how to pace it, what will I eat, midges, rain, do I change shoes, running in dark? What if? All valid questions and the answer is, write it down. I am now the proud owner of 4 sheets/spreadsheets covering my kit list, checkpoint demands (known as my diva list!) Expected split times through checkpoints, even my colour coded bags for back up crew! Many thanks to Fiona Rennie for providing a lot of this info. She has a wee bit experience with WHW, this year was her 13th successful completion....wowser! One tough lady.

On the ferry to Benbecula last summer was when I first mentioned WHW and got offer of back up from the amazing Robin and Cath Livingstone of Perth Road Runners fame! Should I get in that is. They had both crewed before at WHW and was great to know they knew their stuff. Advice on picking back up crew is preferably people with experience, maybe not family members, hopefully runners themselves. All of above applied and they done a great job meeting me on time! Providing updates, making hot choc, coffee, providing my sweet potatoes and beans (yuck! Off the list now)

The week running up to race was a blur of looking out medical supplies, checking of food lists, packing sun cream, midge cream, full waterproof gear etc etc. The day of race was possibly longest day of my life haha! Travelled down to Perth after lunch on the Friday to go through my kit and lists with my back up crew. Tried sleep from 4pm but tossed and turned for an hour, so up again. Had tea and headed for Milngavie at 9pm. Race starts at 1am! So another new experience, previous ultras were 6am start (thought that was an ungodly hour, lol)

The church hall in Milngavie was buzzing with athletes and back up crews from all over the world (18 different nationalities I believe) I actually heard. What is this this midge they talk off?? Thankfully they could not cope with the wind this year!

At registration you pick up your goody bag, get your number strap, get weighed in and handed your weight card for the race along with car permits for back up crew. You are weighed before race and again at 50, 80 miles and finish. This is to ensure you are taking on enough fuel throughout race and not putting yourself in danger. My back up crew were warned that I had dipped below 96% of start weight at 51 mile and I would be pulled from race at 80 mile if it continued, so operation eat as much as you can was implemented, lol. Not easy as race goes on as you do not feel like eating sometimes. That's when a good crew come in, noting what you have had at each checkpoint and basically suggest/force feeding you, haha! Can honestly say though we had no crossed words, no tantrums and no tears....well nearly on Devil!!

The race set off at 1am in fine conditions and we had been given race brief to expect weather!! Later. I wore my Garmin for first part of race mainly to keep me from going too fast. Decided on 8.30 miles and stuck to it pretty religiously, passed Drymen at 12 miles feeling sluggish, so as marathon runners you know that is good. Up over Conic hill in dark was strange, looking behind you could see a stream of spotlights bobbing along the trails. I ran part of this with a German guy on his maiden WHW too!. Near the top a strange buzzing could be heard and this was a drone filming us. Descent into Balmaha, 19 miles, was taken very steady and met my crew for some porridge, top up of fluids and banana, gels and bars to go. Next time I would see them was 41 miles, so I had a drop bag delivered to Inversnaid at 34 miles (Strawberry Yazoo milk there was fab....definitely still on list) So the technical sections along Loch Lomond passed rather uneventfully, just wanted it done with no mishaps as you are at risk of turning ankles etc. Ended up running some of this section with Michael Tweedley (of Adventure show fame last week when winning Kintyre ultra) He was having rough time so we kept each other going along loch. Loch side was left behind and terrain becomes more runnable and passed through rollercoaster section of course at Crianlarich and this is where both myself and Michael confirmed our quads were trashed, steep up and downhills are not my idea of fun at 50 miles, sadly he was to drop out later with stomach problems. Off the 212 starters, there were 53 DNF's...maybe a sign of the challenge.

As mentioned previously next weigh in was at 51 miles, Cath dealt with my paperwork while Robin seen to my food and I attacked another muller rice, coffee and stocked up on fluids. When I was told about weight loss it really started to play on my mind so I made concerted effort to eat something every 20 mins. Only slight problem was my garmin died and had no idea of time, lol.

Tyndrum at 53 miles is another milestone as that is finish of Fling race and only the Devil to do! Arrived in Bridge of Orchy at 60 miles feeling the effects but still running fine and walking the up hills (Something that has taken a bit of getting used to as a marathon runner who does not want to walk at all, but walking up hills early on saves legs for later!)

I had felt calf niggle a bit previously at Bridge of Orchy and Cath gave it some massage (Handy having a qualified masseuse on the team!) Same again at next stop which was Glencoe ski centre, however left there and ran all way through Kingshouse, the wind had been quite strong in face for last 10 miles or so and now it was gale force....well 40-50mph they say. Walk jogged it towards Devils staircase when bang! Shooting pain in right calf reduced me to sitting on a rock trying to massage it. Knew it was not good so hobbled the mile to bottom of staircase where more massage applied but was not looking good. This is when my knights in shining armour appeared, Haha! AKA Tam Graham and pals. They ran to their car and applied KT tape to my calf and Tam even removed his calf guard and gave to me. Without doubt I was a DNF otherwise. So I set of into the wind and rain limping badly up hill. Stopped 1/3 way up looking back down telling myself race was over, words of encouragement from relay

runners made me carry on. Not any better at 2/3 way up and really felt it was all over, could feel the tears in eyes, so frustrated as I had paced it well for 75 miles, eaten well and back up crew said I was looking good (aye right!!). Anyway 5th placed runner Mark Caldwell (Or the guy in the colourful shorts, as I knew him at the time, lol) stopped briefly to encourage me. You are almost at top, might as well hobble in to Kinlochleven and rap it there. Thanks Mark, from then on it was head down grit teeth and get on with it. Oh and the thought of my £1200 sponsorship but more importantly the threat of slagging from Ian Beattie (Arbroath Footers stalwart!) should I DNF, haha! The Footers motto.

So I arrived into Kinlochleven in pain but mobile enough, I could actually almost jog downhill, was just the flat and uphill that was a problem. Weighed in ok and spent my longest time at checkpoint approx. 15 mins. Took on food, hot coffee and wrapped up for the 15 mile walk/jog home. Weather was awful at this point and The Lairig path resembled more of a stream! Set myself target of 4 hour walk to finish and achieved it!! Another mantra of WHW is have a plan but be prepared to change it. I was still too fast for a backup runner to accompany me so I had plenty time to curse and swear about weather on my lonely trek home. Later runners were made to kit up to fully body cover due to deteriorating weather. I have to admit I was damned cold, sausage fingers, teeth chattering etc and that was wearing two jackets, hat and gloves. However the closer you get to finish then the more determined you become to finish and from Devil onwards it was all about getting my first WHW goblet! Time was irrelevant. Another well used phrase amongst WHW and ultra runners. Just keep moving one foot in front of the other...do not stop! It served me well through The Lairig.

I can now share my secret pre race time targets A race sub 17, B race sub 18, C race sub 19 hours. I was on target for my B race time through 75 miles and feel it was definitely on.....so maybe next time!

The last checkpoint is Lundavara at approx. 88 miles, this gave me great boost as I knew I would finish and it was my home patch having run in forestry in Glen Nevis for many a year! Not to say it isn't a long drag in mind you and my split times for race reflect that, going from 8/9th fastest to 47th and 61st for last two legs....but who cares at that point. I arrived at brave heart car park and phoned mother to pre warn I was almost home. The Carnegie back up crew were out in force and sub 20 was mentioned so from somewhere...I had renewed energy and a new target. Great to see Robin with ¼ mile to go and all I could say to him was not stopping got sub 20 on, haha! Crossed the line in 19.53 and 11th place. Thoroughly spent, sore, knackered but more importantly chuffed to bits I had not rapped it!! As Fiona Rennie says with her years of experience. It is not when races go to plan that you learn about yourself but when things go wrong how you adapt and cope. I think I earned my ultra dafties badge!!!

So a week on I am nursing a torn calf muscle...well fibres I think! Offshore panic and they send you home as increased risk of compartment syndrome and DVT's....nah! rest was what I need not loads of stairs and ladders, lol. So Devil is not off cards yet, swim, bike and see. My doctor is a runner and he thinks I am healing quickly and swelling going down by the day so we will see.

I know it's been a long one! (Those that know me well...I can talk!!!!!!)

To sum it all up though. A fantastic experience and great to be part of The West Highland Way Family and it really is a family feel, from the various back up crews, marshalls and organisers etc who all give up their time and all share the same love of ultras and seeing everyone complete this epic adventure. I met some old and new friends along the way. Hats off to all the runners who were out a second night, a lot of mental strength and determination.

So the WHW and me have unfinished business!

After all one goblet is pretty unsociable!....Until next time!!!