

WEST HIGHLAND WAY RACE REPORT 2018 - L E Webb

The safety brief had been concluded , & the minute's silence had been observed ,so a horn then signalled the start of the WHW race 2018 – 'let's go to work' . Unfortunately my normal cat-like reactions had deserted me on this occasion, and most of the 235 fellow competitors had passed by, a rookie error but I felt it was retrievable at this early stage of the race.

I had planned a conservative first leg to Balmaha, looking at previous competitor's splits for someone finishing in 24 hrs, they would probably take around 3 hrs 45 to get there. I knew if I went 'at it' early doors, then the second half of this beast would be a slog and a half .Plus I didn't know the course exactly, but reading all the reports etc you build up a reasonable picture.

Rugby is not what you would call mountainous or hilly, so training when possible was a 2 hr drive to Berwyn or Black mountains , hoy round there for 7 hours , and get back – long days out, but worth it to get some assimilation for what would be in store during the WHWR. Tore the calf muscle in March doing some ridiculous uphill treadmill sprints, but apart from that, no big dramas.

It was light when I reached Drymen , but I knew that I was going a bit too slow, so upped the gas a bit up Conic hill, and into CP1 in 3 hr 57 – I said to Lisa (chief crew co-ordinator) that a re-evaluation of times may be necessary ,and I would need a leeway of about 10 hours from here on in. She had no idea what I was on about , gave me jam sandwich , a bottle of Lucozade and I was on my way .

I budgeted 5 hrs 30 mins to get to Beinglas. Before then the much vaunted lochside section. Actually I thought the bit to Rowardennan was alright (- straight through , no drop bag) , and the section to Inversnaid was ok (dropbag - banana ,Lucozade) , there was just a few gnarly bits after that, but in good spirits and enjoying the 'runner's high' . Suddenly the Loch disappeared , so I rang Lisa to say I reckon I'd be at Beinglas in 20 mins , only for the water to re-appear , and having to re-ring her to say it would be more like another 1hr . Still made it into CP2 in that 5 hr 30 mins.

Crew members 2, and 3 (Harvey - support runner, and Carolyn) had turned up at Beinglas, which was nice .So into the ritual of force feeding yourself porridge, nuts, anything really. Get a banana and Lucozade for the bag, and off to Auchertyre, hoping to be there in about 2 hr 30 -legs feeling ok, but usual dizziness, so no big dramas. Don't know about anyone else but I felt hot getting into Auchertyre, and the crew had done a great job in parking as far away as you possibly could from that weighing in tent. So we all had a good laugh about that as I collapsed into the camping chair, and, as revenge, I made Harvey change my socks. Find of the day nutrition wise here, was fruit in the form of grapes, and I had stayed off coke until now to try to combat the sickness in your stomach thing, but I had a coke to get energy levels up.

Off to Bridge of Orchy – looking for 2 hrs 15 I think. Crossed the road at Tyndrum, and I saw the Danish bloke coming out of the shop with an ice cream and can of coke, I didn't have any money on me as I was shedding weight , so I texted to the crew to 'get an ice cream ready at Bridge of Orchy and surely enough on entering the CP , they hadn't done that. After berating them for this, I gave them an ultimatum to have one ready at Glen Coe or I would probably dnf. I think this shock tactic worked because they seemed to get their act together from there on in .

I was still in good spirits though through BoO and still on track , and graciously received that jelly baby to someone playing Chariots of Fire on a piccolo, and was off to Glen Coe. It was on this stretch that I first encountered the ' Scottish Whopper' - which seemed to entail people telling you that the next CP was 'just a couple of miles away' when in reality you could double whatever they said . Rannoch Moor just went on and on and on, to the point that I had identified Glen Coe as every mountain you saw on the left.

Anyway into Glen Coe, 71 miles in, and still on plan. Changed my shoes as that is what everyone else seemed to do. This was where one Harvey Hubbard was making his WHWR bow. This was a man who until January had not done any running or walking of any note for donkey's years. When we were at the Paddox pub quiz one evening I casually slipped into conversation that I'd entered a race & it was necessary that I needed someone capable of doing the last two legs , approx. 15 miles, yes the 'English Whopper', as he certainly knows now it's 24 ! . I was rather banking on him saying yes , as I've really got no other mates.

It was struggle now out of the checkpoints, but once you get moving again, not so bad. HH set a good pace up Devil's Staircase, but neither of us are very good at descending, and that is a descent into Kinlochleven- entices you in with a false hope like it's just there in front of you , and you're there an 1 hr quicker than you should be , only for that bowl to kick in. Incredibly, we're into KKL on schedule , whereupon someone had fed Lisa a Scottish Whopper.

'Once you do this first climb, it literally is all downhill to the end.'

So we negotiate the first climb, really rejuvenated, as we think it's pretty much plain sailing from there on in. But of course the Lairig Mor is anything but , and it's a long drag. Harvey pipes up 'This it's all downhill to the end thing- do you think they mean metaphorically? ' We pass someone standing at a a gate who says it's only a mile to Lundavra – it's no surprise that 30 minutes later we have still not reached Lundavra. Head torches are on now and 7 miles of downhill await...

To be honest the people who had walked 3 miles back up the track from Fort William to support at that time of night deserve a medal, all of them naturally 'distance challenged' with their 'it's just a mile from here, you'll do it in 24hr if you run ' type thing.

Without a shadow of a doubt, the West Highland Way Race is the best ultra race on the planet, bar none. It is truly epic and spectacular- those words don't do it justice. The people who put it on, the volunteers , marshals, the prize giving, my support crew – everything is unique.

I was privileged to run this race and I will never forget it.

Lawrence Webb