

West Highland Way Race 2018

GEORGE FURMAGE · SUNDAY, JULY 1, 2018

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Race Report

So a week has passed since this year's race and to say I am still on cloud nine is an understatement. It is slowly sinking in what I actually achieved last week as I see folks comments and reactions. I started writing race blogs for myself for cathartic reasons but some folk seem to like reading them so I don't mind sharing. I have a report of two parts. The first shorter version and then war and peace version for a cup of coffee. So here goes.

The short highlights version

In 2013 i ran support for a bloody good runner and one of life's good guys. In the 20 odd miles i ran that day with him, i was inspired by him and he, along with his long suffering wife, lit a flame inside me that still burns so deeply inside me.

I returned in 2015 and helped sweep the race with some quality runners.

2016 i was lucky to get a place and came home in a time of 30:27, humbled and honoured to shake the race director and Scottish athletics chairman's hand after finishing.

I vowed i would return someday bit not on a sightseeing get to the finish mission.

I got in for this years race and the following day i got a message from another of life's good guys offering to crew for me if i wanted him to with his good friend. I spoke to Susan who upon hearing what i wanted out of the race said contact him you need him and the pain that goes with it but you must know its gonna hurt and you need to prepare for that and accept it.

I did and after a messed up few months of serious setbacks which really are no big deal. Shit happens. Life is not about what happens to you it is how you deal with them. I trained as hard as i could and in the final weeks after a check-up i was almost pulled from the race. I fought another battle to get into the race i so dearly loved. Why? I do not know it just does and i didn't realise how much until it was almost taken away from me. I got a late night call the Saturday before the race to say i was back in.

I rocked up to Milngavie on Friday night tapered (yes i did listen mate), relaxed, rested, chilled, nervous, focussed and ready to control my race my way.

Never in my life have i been so focussed, relaxed, in control of my own destiny and as happy as a pig in shit.

Checkpoint stops were on a different level. I was stripped, fed and watered before i even hit the checkpoint. I stood there and got fed watered and clothed then sent on my way. 1st checkpoint in less than 120seconds. The rest were similar.

The team assembled were all at the top of their game and fighting for each other to get the goblet and achieve the mission.

The miles passed rapidly, i got emotional at times but more than anything i smiled. I was in a good place mentally and physically. How? Only the big guy upstairs can answer that one.

As the race went on, issues arose. No big deal do what's needed, adapt and move forward.

Fast forward to miles 65 and 70, hitting the Devil's staircase and Kinlochleven, in daylight. That brought many a tear to my eyes, i was gonna finish before i got to KLL in 2016. Many folk have doubted me, myself included. But i was proving them and myself wrong. I was living every second every minute. I was alive, more alive than anyone has ever been. I was that obese 20 stone guy from a few years ago on his way to a second goblet and a decent Pb. I always remember Adrian Stott in 2016 hugging his goblet, i knew on Sunday i would be the same and i was.

The last 6 miles, i was done in with nothing to give but my crew somehow awakened the fire in me as much as i resisted and they pushed me harder than i have ever been pushed. They squeezed out every last ounce of fight in me as i sprinted gazelle like over the finish line(artistic licence). We clocked in 24:53 with a Pb of 5 hours 34 flipping minutes. We were drained, exhausted but super proud of what we achieved. We all agreed the plan and asked many things of each other and all 4 of us delivered in spades.

I did collapse but hey when you've had 36 shitty gels pumped into you and raced the race of your life its allowed.

I got the goblet which i dedicated to the one woman who has been part of my team for many years. It still hasn't sunk in how great a time, run, achievement it was and yes folk were faster, slower and had better or worse races but on a personal level Saturday was just bloody awesome and i cant thank folk enough for joining me on this wild roller-coaster of a year. I will no doubt do a proper war and peace race report over the next week but had to get some words down. I didn't put names in as folk will know who most are and i will save that for proper thanks in my race blog.

Needless to say, thank you to everyone involved with making the WHWR what it is and allowing me to do some crazy shit i never ever dreamed off. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

The long war n peace version

In 2013 i ran support for a bloody good runner and one of life's good guys. In the 20 odd miles i ran that day with him, i was inspired by him and he, along with his long suffering wife, lit a flame inside me that still burns so deeply inside me. I will always remember our run from Tyndrum to Glencoe as the spark that ignited my love of ultra running. John hit a low point or slump just after Bridge or Orchy and over the course of the next 10 miles he resurrected his race and flew into the checkpoint. It is in those dark times that you find out about yourself and find your inner strength of character.

I returned in 2015 and helped sweep the race with some quality runners. This was such an invaluable run as it let me experience the race from a different angle and give something back to the race. Off course, getting called a fanny by Ada for 24 hours is also something special, so she tells me lol

2016 i was lucky to get a place and came home in a time of 30:27, humbled and honoured to shake the race director and Scottish athletics chairman's hand after finishing. I always say to people from my club that when you step up to a new distance, the time is irrelevant, finishing and enjoyment is important. I will always remember stopping to look back over Rannoch moor and think to myself, you are one lucky son of a bitch. I crossed the line at 7:27AM bubbling like a kid at the achievement of covering 95 miles within 5 years of taking up running. That year I joined a very small group of people who completed the WHW triple crown (156 I think at the time). I am still in disbelief that I completed that in 2016.

I vowed i would return someday but not on a sightseeing get to the finish mission.

I got in to this years race and was kinda dumbstruck that I got in. The following day i got a message from another of life's good guys, Tony Brown, offering to crew for me if i wanted him to with his good friend. I hadn't thought about crew, only as far as that I would not ask my previous crew of Scott and Billy as I thought their experience would be invaluable to other members of the club. I spoke to Susan when we both got home from work. She asked me what do you want out of the race, fun or a time. I said, I want to cross that finish line knowing I had given it my all, knowing I earned that goblet. Upon hearing what i wanted out of the race she said without hesitation, contact him you need him and the pain that goes with it but you must know its gonna hurt and you need to prepare for that and accept it.

January 1st was to be the start of my training proper with a gradual build up. Unfortunately, my body had other ideas and I ended up in hospital with a suspected heart attack. Thankfully everything checked out ok apart from getting put on tablets for high blood pressure and orders to do nothing more than 20-30 mins of exercise. Frustrated is an understatement, but I did as told

even though I felt ok. A few weeks later I got the ok from the hospital and told gradually build up my exercise and don't do anything daft. If I felt bad stop. So, back to training that night followed by the devil's burden hill race and the Falkirk ultra to get rid of some frustration. I felt fine and gradually began to build my fitness back up and was starting to feel ready. I hadn't trained as much as I had wanted to but upon comparing stats from 2016 I had completed less miles but more elevation so that gave me a wee morale boost. Two weeks before the race I got an email from Sean asking me to give more information on my high BP and he asked me to go to the DRs. I did this and the doc advised me that running a marathon would not be a good idea until my BP settled down. I did try to explain that I had ran in the Strathearn marathon 5 days previously to no avail. Sean asked me for the readings which I got from the nurse who said the readings looked fine and the doc is being a bit over cautious, which is fair enough buuuut. I sent the email with my BP readings and awaited a call or email. Praying for the best news but preparing for the worst. I knew the race meant a lot to me for many various reasons but the prospect of it being taken away from me at the eleventh hour really brought it home to me how much it meant. I got the call about 10pm on the Saturday before the race. You're in, I will see you on Friday night in Milngavie. All my Christmas came at once. I had a race to prep for and not much time to do it. Life is not about what happens to you it is how you deal with them. I have been dealt many shit cards recently but every time I have fought hard to get a winning hand. Why is the West Highland Way Race so important to me? I truly do not know. It is just so special, the people, the route, the camaraderie, the family, the goblet ceremony. Ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

I rocked up to Milngavie on Friday night tapered (yes i did listen Sandy), relaxed, rested, chilled, nervous, focussed and ready to control my race my way.

Never in my life have i been so focussed, relaxed, in control of my own destiny and as happy as a pig in shit. I think it was a post of John's from 2013 that Angela commented that I was an expert at looking miserable in ultras. I also remembered Tony telling me his boy asked him at Glencoe in 2016 if he wasn't enjoying it why was he doing it, just before he pulled out of the race. With these two thoughts in my mind, I resolved to work hard but also enjoy the race just as I had enjoyed my training. Relax, enjoy, work hard and get to fort William in darkness. I got checked in and went to meet my crew. Tony noticed I looked nervous so had a mini pep talk with me. I focussed on him and blocked out everything else. I was ready to go, focussed and knowing what I had to do. I had my times I wanted to hit for the first 50 miles then que sera sera. There was a moving tribute by Adrian Stott for his friend and ultra legend Donald Ritchie. I didn't know the guy but know he is

revered and held rightly so in high esteem. It gave me a buzz knowing I was running in a race that he had competed in. T-5mins Lets do this!

Milngavie to Dryman

The plan was slow steady relax into the race, control the race and do not let it control you. I enjoyed this part of the run for the first time in a while. I never really chatted to anyone but I don't really chat much in races as I like to escape to my own wee world. David passed me after about 9 miles I think. He seemed like a man on a mission which we all were off course. I stepped it up a gear to go with him then heard a voice in my head "your race, your goal, your time" so let him go. I knew his goal time was 22 hours which most definitely not mine. I told Sean in our call that last time I was 30:27, my ultimate wet yer pants goal would be sub 24 but reckoned 27 would be realistic. I met the guys at Drymen, swapped bottles and took a gel. We had a quick chat and it was onwards to Balmaha.

Drymen to Balmaha

This was my first negative part of 2016. I felt shattered and sleepy, but in 2018 I felt great and was having fun. I passed the section where John passed me in 2016 telling me sunrise is coming, hang on in there. I thought to myself remember John's words, then I thought wait a minute I don't feel tired, move yer arse! I was 10 minutes behind my schedule at drymen but knew if I kept it steady I would be ok. Sure enough I arrived into Balmaha ahead of schedule. Tony told me no more making up time. My inner thought was, I am an asshole, I have just upped the bar for that 7 mile section!

Checkpoint stops were on a different level. I was stripped, fed and watered before i even hit the checkpoint. I stood there and got fed watered and clothed then sent on my way. 1st checkpoint in less than 120 seconds. The rest were similar.

As I hit to top of Conic hill, I sent the text, just done ascent starting descent soon. Then another text to say I was hitting the forest. Tom was waiting for me. Top of, buff off, bag off, here eat this (a rice pot). I got to the checkpoint and Tony was waiting with top ready to put on then buff and bag was refilled and put back on while I was fed coffee, a gel and lucazade. I just stood there watching Susan looking on bemused. Right your good to go take this fruit pot and go. Tom walk out with him. It was over and done under 2 minutes

The team assembled were all at the top of their game and fighting for each other to get the goblet and achieve the mission.

Balmaha to Rowerdennan

For some reason a shitty section for me in every race even though its a lovely section. But this year time and the miles passed by quickly. I passed the post where I DNF'ed the fling years ago and chuckled to myself. Not today son, this guy's going to get a goblet. It was here I am sure I was passed by Katie Hall, I was so chuffed to be able to say hi and smile as usually when I have seen her I am at a really low point or my head is messed up but not today. Before long I was in Rowerdennan and saw Tom who guided me to Tony who had everything ready including my BP tablets I hadn't taken but wasn't overly concerned about. Another fast stop from the guys and onwards to Inversnaid. As I clocked in I got a shout out from Gavin which perked me up, it is amazing how much a wee wave or shout can perk you up.

Rowerdennan to Inversnaid to Beinglas

A nice wee technical section where I like to curse Ian Beattie for everything for making us go the low road. Not his doing I know but makes me feel better. I knew this section would be a pain in the ass so just had to suck it up and get on with it. Inversnaid arrived and I saw Angela who welcomed me with open arms as I grinned (in my mind) like a cheshire cat. I was feeling good, I was feeling more alive than I had ever felt before, I was living the dream doing what I love. I quickly got me drop bag, got rid of the shit, filled up with what I needed and grabbed two water bottles before heading to the beinglas and another shitty suck it up technical section. As soon as I got through it I made a right turn into the bushes and sighed a big sigh of relief as I peed my heart out. Onwards to go see Dario. I climbed up, passed his post, gave a wee salute and nod to the big fella and text the guys to say where I was. I lost time here and I knew it but expected it.

Tom met me and got my top and bag and fed me. I clocked in and met the guys who did the pitstop quickly. Last time in 2016 I was 15 mins from getting timed out, this time it was move yer arse. I saw Gordon here who wanted me to pose for a photo next to the Mon the wee county sign. Tony saw this and told me to move my arse. It was good to see Gordon out there. Both him and Sandy, who I trained a lot with, had both pulled out of the race due to various reasons. Both good guys and quality runners.

Beinglas to Auchtertyre

I was bang on schedule right now. I had given myself 2 hours to get to the next checkpoint, a tough ask and I knew it. Oh how I needed the loo and nae cover to hide. I soldiered on passing coo poo alley, another year where its been more than ok. This section is fun and hard at the same time and I was starting to toil a bit. I got into the checkpoint, weighed in but desperately needed to goto the loo.

Auchtertyre to Bridge of Orchy

Eventually I got a free loo then it was onto Tyndrum with Tony who was a dream to run with. We chatted and discussed how we would run. We settled into the run and got our ice creams from Brodie's store and marched on to Bridge of Orchy. Running was going well and it was a fun run to BOO picking of the occasional runner. We passed a bearded mature guy a few miles from the next checkpoint. I said hi Dunc as he nodded and acknowledged us. I had just passed Duncan Watson, who ran the very first race before it was a race with Bobby Shields. Holy shit, if that wasn't a good omen then what was. I was living the dream, running in the ultimate race, loving every minute of it and getting the nod from WHW race royalty. Life doesn't get any better.

Bridge of Orchy to Glencoe

This checkpoint should have been renamed the WCH checkpoint. I saw loads but was too much in the race zone to acknowledge them. Although, I did manage to give Ada the bird as she affectionately(we will go with that) called told me I was still a fanny! Change of support runner to Tom piss poor jokes Vas after another quick pitstop. This section starts with a long daft climb up a hill but the worthwhile reward is a jelly baby from Murdo the Magnificent, another WHWR tradition. What goes up must off course come down and I felt I had the wrong shoes on as my toes were crushed in my road shoes and I got a massive blister on the downhill which I am always pretty crap at. Needless to say, lots of downhill training for next year! The next miles seemed to go on forever as my feet were hurting badly. I have to say I do enjoy this part of the route for its barren emptiness. The miles came down slowly as I slogged it out to Glencoe. Progress was slowing down but I was in fine spirits. I entered the checkpoint just as Chuck Gordon was leaving. I saw his support runner Pete Hunter who met me with open arm and we hugged. I swept the race with Pete in 2015 and it meant a lot to see him.

Glencoe to Kinlochleven

Shoes off, lets see the damage. Hmmm that needs burst. Susan ran to the car got a penknife and said this is gonna hurt are you ready. I remembered James Stewart's words from a podcast "What do you want, Why do you want it and how much do you want it" and without hesitation said just do what you need to. I think everyone in Glencoe heard my potty mouth as the deed was done. The photo taken shows my agony and Tony's ecstasy!. Fed watered foot taped up and ready to go barely able to walk. I got orders from Tony to focus and pinpoint where the pain was then with every step stomp that part of my foot and it would either numb it or I would be in a world of pain and my race would be over. Needless to say, it was numb soon after. The climb up the Devil's Staircase was superb, I was like a kid in a sweet shop. Goddam it I was heading up it in daylight! Last time it was a grumpy head torch march. The downhill to KLL was in a word HELL but was

done (definitely a priority recce next year). I felt like shit but when I went into the checkpoint I saw Karen (who said I looked great, new specs needed!) and Dod which cheered me up. I went to the loo then out for much needed food. I was out my face and on a big slump. Susan gave me a pep talk telling me I had this I told her I hadn't, she replied to shut up and do as I was told, I would be finishing with a 24 in my finish time if I moved my arse. Hmmmm I needed to go again and so glad I did. I came out the loo a second time feeling a bit better but still shit and needed to move my arse and keep going.

Kinlochleven to Fort William

Seeing Dod gave me the wee lift I needed knowing he was a fighter and now was the time I needed to fight, so down the hatch with a mini can of coke and lets go. I powered on up the climb which I love. Then it was a case of picking folk off to motivate me. I stopped for a split second to look at KLL in daylight and got a bit emotional but kept going. This section seems to go on and on but it wasn't long before we passed Jeff Smith where I posed for a photo with Tom. My shuffling was getting slower as tiredness and pain set in but forward to fort William was the only way to go. Tom would stop at every stream and fill a cup up with water for me to drink and hydrate me. Closer and closer I got but seemed to be moving backwards. Lundavra finally came into view. No time to stop just keep moving. By now I was done in, I have given everything and would have happily walked in to fort William. Tom was having none of it, you want it move it you need to keep moving. I pushed on with everything I thought I had onwards, tom was relentless in pushing me to my goal. It was a bit disorientating in the forest as it had been chopped down. Eventually we got to the last climb. Shit shit and double shit. I knew what was coming next. I pushed up the hill s fast as I could. Then Tom gave me a few minutes reprieve before the downhill started and an all out assault to get to Fort William and the time! We started the downhill and soon were passing folk, all the ones who passed me from Lundavra. Then Tony appeared and my reaction was oh fuck. Pain and punishment in equal doses, for only a mile to go it was the longest mile ever with me protesting I needed that road to appear soon, the guys never let up pushing me motivating me inspiring me telling me to fight the fight forget the pain live in the moment go faster grab that goblet and get that time with a 24 in it. Faster and faster I got, closer and closer to the finish I got. The road! There is the road, we can see cars, lets go, you know you want it now go get it! We hit the road and we powered on passing another runner, onto the road running side by side, there's the roundabout, you know how close you are you can smell it go for it, forget the traffic victory awaits you in 400 metres. WHW sign! You have done it! Done it with a 24 in the time! Go finish the job off. I left the guys just at the corner of the leisure centre, I saw Susan

waiting to take my photo but I was on a mission as I sprinted like a gazelle (ok ok I can dream) to the finish line. I had done it, I had flipping well done it! Over five and a half hours faster than 2016!

The Aftermath

I clocked in and sat on the steps unable to stand much but brimming with pride of how I had ran and never once gave up the fight. My very good friend Jane came up to me congratulated me and said some very nice words which meant the world to me. Seeing her and her husband Malcolm at the finish was truly awesome. After a wee rest and group photo, we ventured in to the centre where I thanked Sean for believing in me.

Sitting with a coffee, I felt hot and nauseous. Within minutes I threw up the coffee but felt better for it. Time for the loo and shower. I grabbed my bag and went to the showers with Tony and Tom, I felt light headed and the room was spinning I said. Next thing I know, Sean is looking over me and I am lying flat on my back. Realising, I had fainted, I was more embarrassed than anything else. A stretcher was brought along and I was carried to the mini medical centre as Tom and Tony took photos and videos! I rested then tried to walk but felt crap again so sat down and had a few biscuits. I was back to feeling me again and knew I was but everyone was a bit cautious as you'd expect especially with my recent health issues. But I was fine and went for a quick shower then massage before returning to the car unable to sleep.

I sent a few texts to folk to let them know what happened and I was ok and had a tearful phone call with my sister then tried for a few more hours of sleep. As I nodded off I realised that 2 years ago I was just finishing.

As we sat in the Goblet ceremony seeing folk get their goblet, Susan nudged me and pointed out my sister who had driven all the way up from Falkirk after our phone call to see me get the Goblet. How cool is that. Susan offered to get up and give her seat up but until I got my goblet Susan's place was by my side. This goblet was as much for her as me. I later found out my daft sister had driven her car off the road and a runner who left early had stopped and driven her back to fort William to see me. Runners are just amazing folk.

I got the goblet which I dedicated to the one woman who has been part of my team for many years, my wife Susan. It still hasn't sunk in how great a time, run, achievement it was and yes folk were faster, slower and had better or worse races but on a personal level Saturday was just bloody awesome and I can't thank folk enough for joining me on this wild roller coaster of a year. Right now, I look back over the last 2 years and think did that really happen. For the first time, I felt like a runner, I didn't just complete the race I competed in it, I controlled my race, paced it, relaxed

smiled and knew I was in safe hands with my team. I am now sitting as a two time west highland way runner with a 5:34 PB and a triple crown to boot. Not bad for the 20st fat couch potato! My crew were just unbelievable and like my running went to another level. I will be forever indebted to the two guys who gave up their time to haul my ass to Fort William. Quality runners, great guys and bloody awesome.

I said to Susan way back in December when I initially got in, that I wanted to finish the race with nothing left to give knowing I had given my all and 7 months later I did just that, leaving everything out on the trail. The photos of me after the finish in the leisure centre might not be pretty but I absolutely love them as they show how much I gave in the race. I said afterwards, I would not do it again until 2020 as it takes a lot of family time and commitment but after a casual chat with Susan and my girls, she said if you really want to do it next year do it. So fingers crossed the ballot is kind to me as I will be looking to improve my time even more.

Needless to say, thank you to everyone involved with making the WHWR the iconic event it is and allowing me to do some crazy shit i never ever dreamed off. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Until next year! Oh and just for the record I have rested completely and not ran since last Saturday.