

I've soaked up as many of everyone else's blogs and reports as possible, and like the rest of the Family, just feel humbled time after time by what people have gone through and achieved. There is so much useful and interesting information to be gleaned there, and what shines through is how candid the writers appear to be. All the better for being a shared experience, and able to read between some of the lines – and understanding how “never again” soon turns into a rosy afterglow.

A thought here: “never again” is only something you say the first time you do a marathon, long hill race, or trail ultra. After that, you realise there is no such thing. You are hooked.

Anyway, in case it is of interest to other crazy folk out there, here are my own thoughts and experiences of the 2018 WHW, and a bit of background. I'll try to cover the kind of things which I would like to read about other runners when trying something new and ridiculous for the first time.

Personal background

Born Dec 1947 and lived by the Malvern Hills – perfect trail running country.

Have been for a run on average about once a week since age 18, on and off, just to keep fit, mainly for climbing.

Lived in Strathblane from 1980-84 – on the other side of Mugdock park from Milngavie – which the WHW crosses. Ah, ha – the seed was sown. Must have heard about the Way being invented, and thought it would be great, at that tender age, to do it in 24 hours. This thought did not recur for another 35 years.

Introduced to fell racing in 1985, and was dead keen, doing lots of races in the Peak, the Dales and the Lakes. Was only inspired by the long ones – it was the challenge. Lost interest in 1987 because at 40+ I was getting rather old, and races took up too much climbing time.

Normal outdoor life for the next 25 years or so (rock, alpine, ski, sea kayak, some fell races, etc.).

Age 58, moving to NW Highlands, looking for some running events. Did loads of hill races, including all the long Scottish ones, over the next ten years – and still do. Went for a training run in the Pentlands once, with a certain Kate Jenkins, and I am sure she mentioned the WHW. Something about “it's only pain and it will all be over tomorrow”.

Always looking for something new or different to do, tried the ridiculously long Highland Fling in 2011. Fine. That was my only “never again” moment, and I meant it.

Spent so much time in Inverness, heard about the lovely new trail up the Great Glen from Fort William, and the challenge was too strong, so did that in 2016. I took it seriously, built up my training over four runs along parts of the GGW from 20 – 25 – 32 – 40 miles, judging an optimal average pace using a Garmin – 8.1 kph – and recceing almost the whole 72-mile route. A bus pass is certainly very handy for this. I stuck religiously to my race plan, content to be almost last for the first ten miles, then just continued at the pace I knew (8.1 kph, give or take) all the way, and passed most of the others en route. It was new territory after Invermoriston (40 miles), but the steady pace, easy terrain and lovely drop bags did their trick. Also, familiarity with every landmark made it easy to break the run down into manageable sections. Felt quite emotional along the finishing straight. At the finish I mentioned to the organisers that the Fling, five years earlier, had felt like a harder race,

even though 19 miles shorter. Hope they were not too upset. It's the terrain, and the Fling is much harder to pace.

So, did the Fling and the Cateran in 2017 and looked forward to having a better shot at the Fling with better planning in 2018. Nevertheless, pacing still went awry towards the end. More on that later as relevant to the WHW. You will understand that at the end of the Fling, on both occasions, I felt unable to put one foot in front of another, and lay down for a while, unable to comprehend how anyone could carry on for another 43 miles, and totally certain that I never would.

Those nice SI Entries people send a regular email with all the up and coming events which still have entries open, and I happened to glance down it one day and noticed that the West Highland Way Race was in its entry window. Up to this point I had never given the WHW the slightest thought. It was a long time before I could admit to my wife or anyone else that I had accidentally put in an entry application – no idea why, except that it was clearly just a challenge too far, and why not? Life is short. Then it was a thrill to be accepted, and I wondered how far I would get.

Preparation and build-up

1) Exercise

Autumn 2017 – Feb 2018: a few 15 to 20-mile trail runs in forests and moors within 30 miles of Inverness.

December 2017: trekking in Patagonia.

February 2018: Glen Tress Trail Marathon (highly recommended).

March 2018: couple of short runs in Alpine areas between skiing.

April 7th: Kielder 50k on the way back.

April 14th: train Fort William to Tyndrum, then ran back via the Devil course as training for the Fling, and so that there would be no nasty surprises when it came to the WHW. Carried all food and drink.

April 28th: Highland Fling – a PB over 2011, but not by very much. Still got pacing wrong. Finally got it right on the WHW!

May 5th: Kintyre Way Ultra, was not planned, but was “supporting” my wife in the relay, and thought “why not?”. Only about 36 miles, and easy going mostly.

May 26th: the Isle of Jura Fell Race, which I had been co-ordinating for the last 7 years, and finally had the chance to run again. Fabulous.

June: some long slow days doing the LAMM in Harris with Rosie, my wife, and as buddy runner for a competitor in the Celtman extreme triathlon.

The week before the WHW: try to cut down a bit on the beer and wine, eat lots, and sleep well.

2) Planning

Yes, **nutrition**, that food and drink thing while you are running long races, is an endless topic. I've had some disasters, and tried to get it all together for this one. Here was the plan, and it worked for me:

Have a nice tasty meal in Milngavie 5 or 6 hours before the off. Drink the odd fizzy drink or smoothie over the next few hours, but not too much. You don't want the figure on your weight card to be too high to begin with.

Carry two 500 ml floppy bottles in the race vest, full of dissolved energy powder + electrolytes, plus an empty 330 ml bottle in hip-socket on bum bag. Top up at pit stops as and when required. This is my main source of energy, hydration and anti-cramp all in regular gulps. Also supplementary jelly babies and confectionary bars permanently in pockets in case they are needed.

Always available in the support van:

- Home-made broth
- Home-made semolina and rice pudding
- Heinz tomato soup
- Sweet fresh mint tea
- Smoothies
- Savoury cheese sandwiches
- Custard
- Fruit in tubs, like mandarin segments
- Bananas
- Spare confectionary bars (e.g. Marathon – or is it Aztec, I can't remember)
- Crisps

All these items, except the crisps, were exactly right at one pit stop or another.

In each drop bag at Rowardennan and Inversnaid: two bananas and a 330 ml bottle of drink as described above. Bananas are perfect for eating on the run, and all packaging is swiftly biodegradable.

Pacing schedule for the WHW race

How: I worked out my Fling and WHW schedules by spending ages analysing my Fling times and pouring over the spreadsheets with all the splits for these two races for the previous two or three years. I would pick a finish time which I thought might just be feasible, and analyse the splits for other runners who had finished around that time, calculating various averages and taking careful note of any runners who had started slowly and finished many places higher. For example, in the WHW I looked at all runners who had taken more than two hours to Drymen and subsequently finished in under 24 hours, and analysed their subsequent splits. There were some really interesting performances.

For the sections as far as Auchtertyre, I reckoned on Fling times plus roughly 10%, but to see how it went, and be mentally prepared to be flexible and not worry about it.

So, for example, my Fling schedule/WHW schedule as far as Rowardennan was:

CP	Fling	WHW
Drymen	2:05	2:15
Balmaha	3:30	3:45
Rowardennan	5:00	5:30

In the events, I hit these times almost spot on. The amazing thing was that having allowed an extra 10% to Rowardennan, when I got there, having forced (allowed) myself to go that bit more slowly, I

felt so much fresher and less jaded than ever in the Fling. At this point I began to feel quite optimistic. The only bad part was the first leg between 1:00 am and 3:00 am, when it was cold and dark, and I felt stiff and achy, and, as always, wondering if I would make it past Drymen before having to disappear into the woods. As soon as it got light, the approaching Highlands were a wonderful place to be.

CP	Fling	WHW
Inversnaid	6:30	7:15
Beinglas Farm	8:15	9:15
Auchtertyre	10:30	12:15

The section from Balmaha to Rowardennan is relatively benign. OK, it has a few sharp little hills, but is not rough going. The following section from Rowardennan to Inversnaid sported the alternative low-level lochside route which was new to me. It is quite up-down, rocky and rooty, and a good precursor for the next section after Inversnaid.

On the Fling, I was a few minutes late at Inversnaid, and began to realise that my schedule had been a little optimistic. I had then made the mistake, since I love rough, rocky sections, of hammering it a little too hard on the way to Beinglas. I began to die, and lost even more time over the final smoother section, almost totally bonking after picking up my drop bag and safely out of sight of the marshals. After that, it had taken me getting on for three whole hours to struggle up and down and up to Tyndrum.

So, the lesson learnt for the WHW was to take it nice and gently over the rocks and tree roots on the three miles which start about a mile after Inversnaid, and only run the downhill bits, and slowly at that. The proof of this tactic was to arrive at Beinglas four minutes under schedule, and feeling just great. My brilliant catering and van-management team (Rosie, my wife) was, as always at every CP, immediately welcoming, and able to cater straight away with whichever of the above nutrition list I happened to feel like, and I was off again in less than five minutes. What a contrast to the Fling.

I had allowed three hours to get to Auchtertyre, not knowing how I might feel at Beinglas, and not to encourage myself to push too hard at this early stage. In the event, it went quite easily in 2:24, which was no slower than in the Fling, and I arrived well early at Auchtertyre, still feeling great. It's all in the careful early pacing and close attention to drink and calories right from the start.

Also, I felt that when you have in your mind that you are only around half way, you relax and enjoy it more – there is less pressure – if you don't feel like jogging up a little gentle hill, well, don't.

Auchtertyre at midday was a happy, crowded and sunny place. Straight to John's weighing tent, trying to be as heavy as possible – always difficult, because I lose loads of weight running in warm weather no matter how much drink I force down.

From here on my schedule was more of a guessing game, as I had only other people's splits to go on, and you never know how long they spent with their carers at the CPs, or how easy or difficult they were finding it. I'd only written down 2 hours to Bridge of Orchy, but realised that 2:20 would be a more realistic time, which proved correct. You know it is going to be a relatively straightforward section, but it does go on longer than you expect.

It was wonderful to see the happy faces of two friends who had come out from Comrie for the day with their Harris(6) and Jasmine(9) – accomplished and budding cyclists and runners all of them. First they appeared at Tyndrum, then at Bridge of Orchy. I got an odd look from the two little ones

when I jumped in the air and said “only another 43 miles to go”. Hope they have not been damaged for life.

From Auchtertyre, Rosie was joined by my very experienced and psychologically spot-on support runner, John Moffat. They realised at B of O, apparently, that I was looking a bit less perky than at Auchtertyre, and gently persuaded me that it would be nice for John to jog along with me from Victoria Bridge over the long reach of Rannoch Moor to the ski centre. It was good to be able to chat about running, routes and all sorts, with such a controlled and understanding runner, and the miles drifted past.

Along this section, as for the whole race from beginning to end, to my surprise I was virtually never out of sight of other runners. I thought the field would spread out more than that, but over and over again, you passed or were passed by familiar faces (and T-shirts, shorts, rucksacks, kilts, nice legs, hairy legs, etc.).

CP	Guesstimate	Actual
Bridge of Orchy	14:15	13:52
Glencoe Ski Centre	17:00	16:40
Kinlochleven	20:00	19:54
Lundavra	23:00	22:17
Fort William	25:00	23:57

Everyone who’s done ultras says you always get at least one **bad patch**. Apart from the first two hours out of Milngavie, which I did not enjoy, I did not get any bad patches as such whilst running. My **near death experience** occurred quite suddenly a few seconds before arrival at the van at Glencoe car park. I had slipped back a bit to just 20 minutes ahead of “guesstimate”, but suddenly felt really peculiar, and drained of some resources which I’d never known about before. I think on the long drag across the moor I had not been drinking and nibbling as much as I should have, and my body suddenly went in to some kind of withdrawal from wanting to live any longer. My support realised that talking to me was not a good idea, and I slumped into the van feeling that I would not be able to stand up again, and thinking, oh well, I got this far, that’s it, what a shame, but it’s definitely all over. Oh dear. Can’t do anything about it. Try not to lose consciousness.

Ten or fifteen minutes go by, and I’m thinking, well that’s it, no chance of catching time up now, and anyway, the next two big hills would be impossible.

Then, I get a mug of tomato soup, which just hits the spot. Then I can face a mug of the sweet, warm, fresh mint from the garden, tea. Then a few spoonfuls of Rosie’s semolina – the solid kind. Then after 25 minutes, I suddenly feel ready to go, and off we jog down to the Kingshouse, or where it used to be.

I took it very slowly up the Devil’s Staircase, I’m very slow up steep hills, and as usual several parties overtook. However, descending, especially on rough ground, is my speciality, so on the way down we overtook lots of people. One guy shouted out “I hope I’m like you when I grow up”. The next day in the Nevis Centre we agreed that neither of us would ever grow up.

And so it was onwards and mostly ever downwards to KLL. Another weighing committee ahead, so secreted various boulders in my bum-bag (not really) so as to pass the weigh-in, and a long 9-minute stop for food and drink. John wanted to finish his tea, richly deserved, so they had to calm me down from wanting to rush off before he had finished. He would have realised that it would be many people’s ambition to finish sub-24 hours, and after a few minutes had suggested that perhaps my

scheduled times of 3 hours to Lundavra, then 2 hours to Fort William were maybe a little pessimistic, and it should be possible to do those legs in more like 2:30 hours and 1:30 hours. We had 3:55 hours left to get there in 24, hence the panic.

Stiffness soon sets in, so it was walking along the road out of KLL to loosen up again, and the usual very slow plod up the steep hill which leads to the Lairig Mor track. On the way up the gentler hill to the bealach (col in English), beckoned on by the headlights of Jeff's drinks station, we passed two young ladies. Shortly afterwards, the support runner ran up to us as she needed a couple of paracetamols for her competitor who was clearly suffering from some terrible pain. It was a reminder of how much we are in the hands of whatever our bodies throw at us. I was very lucky – same shoes, socks and clothes the whole way, and no problems whatsoever with feet or temperatures. I was advised very sensibly by Rosie to pick up a running cag at Glencoe in case the weather took a turn for the worse, but it stayed in the bum-bag.

Clothing note: new medium thickness single skin socks; Hoka Speedgoats; calf compression tubes; $\frac{3}{4}$ -length lycra to cover the rest of the legs; a thermal long-sleeved top which is compromise good for cold, wet, dry and warm running conditions; a Salomon ultra vest for the floppy bottles; a very thin light breeze-resistant running jacket which went on in the cold winds and off in the warm glens, and tied round my waist; a peaked cap plus a buff as standby for cold or wet times; thin gloves which stayed on until well after dawn.

So, on down – mainly – towards Lundavra. On the way, you pass a young man somewhere around the long RH bend who tells you it is only $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles. That is being economical with the numbers – it's actually $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles. You can see the campfire and lights after $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles, that is true.

From Glencoe, and especially KLL, it was max effort and determination to ignore the discomfort. Another lesson learnt, after we put head torches on a couple of miles before Lundavra, was to buy a better one – everyone else's were like searchlights in comparison, and intense concentration was required not to take a flier.

Even though time was looking critical, when the lovely people at Lundavra revealed their coke and Irn Bru, a swig was irresistible, and it was too cold to be drunk quickly. Thanks, guys.

Well, after the next rough up and down 3 miles, lights ahead bobbing along far below, then far above us, we reached the forest road, and at last the final summit before the drop into Glen Nevis. John was adamant that it was only three miles from here to the finish. I had been glancing at my watch every few minutes doing wild calculations of average speeds and distances working out what time we would need to be at that final summit, assuming it was three miles, in order to have a chance of scraping home under the 24 hours. I knew that, when fresh and on a training trail run, I would be able to run that last three miles in about 25 minutes, and at that last summit we had about 27 minutes left on the clock.

Leaving nothing to chance, I pushed as hard as possible down the hill and along the flatter section lower down – the sort of trail where level feels like uphill at this stage – and began to wonder when we would pass the WHW post which leads off to the right at right angles to the forest road. I knew that point was about two miles from the finish from my "Devil" training run. After nearly two miles we eventually reached that point. It was, in fact, almost four miles from the summit to the finish.

There were still about 13 minutes left on the clock, so there was no option but to force out every last ounce of energy, "ignore the pain", and go for it. Would that roundabout ever come? It did, and so did the Lochaber sports centre, the tapes, and the finish. 23:57:17. Close.

It took a while to recover enough to stand up and talk normally, but as everyone who has been there knows, all the race folk, other runners and supporters were just fantastic. What a wonderful place to be.