

Neil Ramsay – West Highland Way Race – June 2018

Main Cast (in order of appearance):

Alan McDonald	Core Crew	Driver & Fixer
Barry Lovern	Core Crew	Checkpoint Charlie & Support Runner (3) KLL-FTW
Dave Hanna	Trailblazer	Fellow Runner – Got me into this mess
Michelle Young	Day tripper	Support Runner (1) Auch-GLC
Ruth Morgan	Day tripper	Support Runner (2) GLC-KLL
Alistair Robinson	Day tripper	Support Runner (2) GLC-KLL
Mabel Morgan	Mascot	Athletic Contemporary

2017. I ran and was delighted to finish the race in 2017 - however a couple of issues on the day (days!) and a time of 31:20 left room for improvement. Despite having said, “never again” and meaning it, the temptation to have another go got the better of me; I entered the ballot and was ‘lucky’ to be offered a place, I was also fortunate to get Fling and Devil entries meaning I was having a second crack at the WHW Triple Crown (an unofficial event comprising 3 races on the WHW).

Before. My WHW year started in January at the Oak Tree training weekend with Dave and Michelle. I suppose this was the first sign of improvement on last year’s efforts – this year I remembered trainers (left on the doorstep 2017), managed the full out and back to Inversnaid (only Rowardennan 2017) and was considerably less drunk in the bar (total disgrace 2017). Last year I had completed some long training runs but been inconsistent, not running regularly. This year I followed a plan of low but regular weekday mileage with a longer run, building in distance, Saturdays. Having told Michelle about my training spreadsheet she took on the multiple roles of trainer, conscious and persistent (but welcome) nag. February to June we stuck to the misery miles spreadsheet, adhering to my plan which I think proved beneficial; I was encouraged by a personal best Fling finish of 10:55 in April. Pre-race 2017 I averaged 17 miles per week, this year it was 30, I was a little fitter, a tiny bit lighter, not acutely injured and a great deal better prepared. Tinkering with my race plan spreadsheet was a near daily activity in the couple of weeks prior to the race – following dozens of versions I ended up back where the draft plan had started, a 24 hour finish. I genuinely felt I could not manage 24 hours; however the time I planned for each individual section was reasonable, the problem was this assumed I was running, and with all the sections strung together on the day it seemed inevitable that time and pace would drift at some point. I told the crew my plan targeted 24 hours but that 25-26 was more likely. A further personal goal was to, unlike 2017, finish in time to use the hostel room and actually sleep in the bed I had booked.

Come race weekend I had the Friday off and was desperate to get some sleep. I prepared everything in the morning and went to bed around 15:00, where I entirely failed to sleep, but hopefully benefitted from the rest. I got up at 21:30, had a shower and ordered dinner from the local takeaway –honestly believing a fish supper (much to Michelle’s horror and disgust) was a great idea, it would fuel the night ahead and still had a couple of hours to be digested. I was served the largest fish ever to have swum the 7 seas – it was a monster. That fish supper was like a brick in my stomach until around Beinglas 12 hours later. I drove to Alan’s – he took over and his long weekend of driving began. We arrived at registration 23:58, Sandra Beattie told me if I’d better get a move on or I’d be

DQ'd – something which was pretty appealing to be honest. I was tagged, weighed and ready to go. We met Dave and support – he was typically cheery and anxious to get going. Alan took some pictures and we had a quick run through of the plan and kit, Alan queued up to get me a coffee and I listened to the race brief – this year Sean predicted there would “be no weather”.



Fancy a run Neil?

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

Milngavie – Balmaha (time of day, 04:20). I jogged along steadily here, everything felt fine, it was cool but not cold and midges were not out in force – ideal except from the ludicrous time of day and huge distance to Fort William. Just before turning left on to the ‘tedious path of many gates’ I followed the runner ahead of me down a short stretch of road and found we were running alongside but not on the WHW, the path was parallel to us on the other side of a fence – this was only perhaps 100 metres - but I was not on the trail - cheating? I over thought this insignificant deviation far too much – before eventually stopping for 30 seconds to penalise myself and thereby dispel my irrational worry, odd behaviour which I can only attribute to sleep deprivation. Last year when I passed through Drymen I remember thinking how daunting the remaining distance was and struggling (walking a little way) on up the trail, but I felt much better this year and jogged straight through and onwards. Shortly before Conic I was able to switch off my head torch and made good progress up and over the hill down towards Balmaha. I passed Fraser McCoull on the descent who I knew had completed a tough 100 miler only weeks previously – he said he had sore feet but hoped a shoe change at Balmaha would see him right. I arrived at the checkpoint ahead of schedule; with

neither of the crew around I found our unoccupied car and waited a bit unsure what to do – fortunately I did not think I particularly needed anything so decided to leave my head torch hanging from the wing mirror to hopefully indicate I had been and gone and resolved to just get moving, but at that moment Alan and Barry appeared with porridge and coffee at the ready. Barry rebuked me for exceeding expectations – it was certainly out of character and a running first for me.

Balmaha – Rowardennan (06:04). I like this section and its familiarity somehow makes it pass relatively quickly, it was a sunny pleasant morning and I think I may have been very close to enjoying myself. Fraser overtook me so I hoped his shoe change had worked its magic, unfortunately I passed him again shortly before the checkpoint still complaining of foot pain. Fraser was instrumental a few years back in getting Dave and myself out on the WHW and eventually participating in this race, I was sorry to hear that later in the day he had to withdraw – he will be back to fight another day. The midges at Rowardennan were not bad and I stopped to eat a little porridge. I do not like carrying a pack and avoided this by taking a light jacket with some supplies in the pockets, I also wore a belt throughout the race carrying mandatory kit (Foil & Phone).

Rowardennan – Beinglas (09:53). I jogged out of the checkpoint and decided to try keeping this going until reaching the fire road climb. Having managed to keep moving reasonably I walked the climb eating and drinking what I had brought from the checkpoint. The WHW race follows the ‘Low Road’ which I have only run twice previously – it is more technical and, for me, slower than the ‘High Road’ – it seemed to take a very long time, not helped by a few small walking stints, before I emerged back on to the fire road. I arrived at Inversnaid ~08:05 and sat down for a couple of minutes to eat and drink the contents of my dropbag before pushing on towards Beinglas. Again familiarity helps me here; all of the familiar climbs, rocks, gates, bridges and posts pass by and I reached Beinglas feeling okay and glad to have the lochside behind me. Alan and Barry were ready with supplies; I ate a little, restocked pockets and moved on.

Beinglas – Auchtertyre (12:21). Again I knew there was an incline a mile or so out of the checkpoint so I jogged there then snacked and walked my way up. I walked a lot of this section 2017 and was conscious of trying to push on where flat or downhill. I tried to keep up with people in front of me and run when they ran, although I generally lost them eventually this helped to gradually pull me along. Cow Poo Alley was dry and clear – I soon reached the Crainlarich gate reckoned to be the halfway point – last year my knee was bad here and I felt very glad to be feeling okay going into the rollercoaster stretch. At the road crossing I was quite glad to be stopped by traffic for a minute before crossing over and jogging on to Auchtertyre. Running up towards the checkpoint I was beginning to struggle a little – but at ~50 miles this is to be expected. I was weighed at Auchtertyre and had lost a couple of kilos which I assured the marshal, John Kynaston, was simply my monstrous fish supper eventually breaking down. I changed T shirt here, had a drink and picked up my first support runner, Michelle, she of the nagging misery miles.

Auchtertyre – Bridge of Orchy (14:50). Michelle and I chatted all the way to Tyndrum, she was already having to set the pace by running on ahead and instructing me to keep up – left to my own devices I think I’d have been walking from here on. We saw Alan & Barry again briefly at Brodie’s Store before walking up the road out of town. From this point I was not able to really run consistently, and certainly not of my own volition – this is where patient and persistent support is

essential. Although pretty slow we did jog most of the distance in to B.O.O. Alan & Barry were waiting at the train station as they could not get parked at the checkpoint, we had a drink at the car and all walked down to the checkpoint. Instruction came from further up the route that runners must now carry/wear a jacket – so Barry ran back to the car to fetch this (I had ditched it at Auchtertyre) affording me a couple of very welcome minutes sit down.

Bridge of Orchy – Glencoe (17:54). From B.O.O there is a reasonably lengthy climb up Jelly Baby Hill – we walked all of this. Nearing the top and to the strains of ‘Flower of Scotland’? on a tin whistle (strains seems about right) we passed Murdo who was busy with a couple of people so we passed by without collecting the ubiquitous Jelly Baby. I ran, slowly, down to Inveroran, walked briefly and started jogging at the cottage just past the hotel. I surprised myself by managing to maintain the jog until the gate at the start of the drove road. I then walked until the path tops out opening up on to Rannoch Moor. From here I was increasingly grumpy and difficult; Michelle had to work hard encouraging me to run as much as possible. Although slow this was far easier than last year – the weather at this point in 2017 was horrendous, we were lucky this year, great weather throughout but enough breeze to keep the midges in check. Running in to Glencoe I could hear Ruth shouting her regular tiresome encouragement of “doing really well” “nearly there” “not far now” “looking fresh” and other assorted positive lies. I had a coffee here and Ruth badgered me to eat and drink, before bringing Miss Mabel out to say hello. Thanks again for pushing me this far Michelle and tolerating what can only be described as a petulant child for over 20 miles.

Glencoe – Kinlochleven (21:13). We left Glencoe 9 minutes ahead of schedule and arrived in Kinlochleven 8 minutes behind – I had gone from exceeding to missing target - but I had anticipated this collapse in pace and this section was a huge improvement on my time and condition last year, I was also glad the schedule had held up this far. From Glencoe I was with fresh support runners Ali & Ruth (as Michelle says at least on their section they had one another) and we had a good time chatting and jogging along. Again support set the pace and I tried (often failing) to keep up. I was glad to reach the Devil’s Staircase as it meant I had a guilt free walk. Ali was very disappointed by the absence of the honesty shop at the top of the Devil which had surprised us last year- I pointed out to Ali these are turbulent times in retail, first House of Fraser closures, now this. The long descent into Kinlochleven was pretty slow but much improved on last year’s trudge downhill. We jogged in to Kinlochleven where Alan pointed out he was able to walk alongside me as quickly as I was ‘running’. My weight here was roughly the same as Auchtertyre - I lingered too long (~17 minutes) but needed the rest and refuel, also I was aware that 24 hours was now, almost certainly, out of reach so although time mattered to me I felt comfortable taking a break. Ali & Ruth - you both done great, thanks again – there is no doubt Ruth you are a very strong and robust women.

Kinlochleven – Lundavra (00:12). It is a long tough climb out of Kinlochleven and we (Barry had taken over as support) walked all of it. Crew all day had been patient and encouraging, Barry was no different, ignoring my grumpy attitude and encouraging us to jog any flat or downhills – helping to push me along at a pace I would never achieve on my own. The WHW is used by thousands every year, walking, running, cycling – and I really don’t know why, the surface towards Lundavra ranks somewhere in appeal and comfort between hot coals and broken glass – every step was painful now and I was making slow progress although Barry kept us moving and we eventually reached Lundavra which was a boost – there was a roaring fire on the go, music blaring out and of course, typical of

any checkpoint in the wilderness a photo booth. In our exhausted state we simply stood in the frame – failing to notice the props, too tired for observing correct, wacky, photo booth etiquette.



Lundavra – Fort William (02:31). Although it was now Sunday and we were struggling along in the dark it was the home stretch, we would finish, I would see the inside of a hostel room and sleep in a bed soon. For the last time Barry led alternating spells of jogging and walking and the final miles dropped away until we saw Alan at the Braveheart carpark who I think shouted some improbable nonsense about my picking up the pace. Barry & I jogged along the road to the '30' sign and I walked for a minute or so before forcing myself into a run for the final kilometre.

WHW Take 2: 96th Position / 198 Finishers, 25:31:01



After. The WHW prize giving is a special event, I was very proud to see Dave collecting his well-deserved second goblet for finishing 5th in an incredible time of 17:44:17. As with the first my second goblet (finish) was a team effort, enormous thanks to;

- The organisers, marshals, volunteers, crews and fellow runners for making this happen.
- Michelle, for the many months, laughs, beers, sodas and misery miles, we are all looking forward to crewing your 2020 WHW Race.
- Ali, great company, thanks for coming along, I think you were exceptionally obliging and brave agreeing to support again after last year's night manoeuvres.
- Ruth, you are an excessively nice person, I'm not sure how to handle such enthusiasm and positivity but think I am improving – I barely recoiled from your parting hug at Kinlochleven.
- Barry, I hugely appreciate all of your efforts over race weekend but especially your support over the final 15 miles of unremitting all out fun.
- Alan who looked after me (again) and everyone else so well (again) - making it all work (again) – Thank you.

Next. I will be running the Devil (Tyndrum to Fort William) in August, completing my second Triple Crown Challenge after which I have told the crew I will only return to the WHW if and when the route is fully carpeted - we will see if my resolve holds come the ballot in November. I had a great weekend at this special event and hope you have enjoyed my report, thanks for reading, Neil.

