

West Highland Way Race – Saturday 23 June 2018

1am on Saturday 23 June saw myself, fellow Ranelite Kris Davidson, and around 230 others gathered nervously outside Milnnavie Railway station anticipating the start of the 2018 West Highland Way Race and wondering how we would cope with 96 miles of trail with an advertised 14,700 feet of climbing. The pre-race briefing simply warned us to beware of 'the weather' but this year it was perfect running conditions throughout – not too warm, overcast and dry. One blessing!

The first stage to Balmaha is through the dark. I love running in the dark on trail however as the sun came up we were faced with the first serious climb. At the time, a beast, but by the end of the day a foothill. It was so steep descending that it was as slow as going up, however I was greeted by the heartening sight of my support crew and breakfast. Well, if they could get the stove to work.

After a midge-infested bowl of soup I was off up the east side of Loch Lomond. What I thought would be a nice jaunt along the loch shores and what, on paper, was a flat section, turned out to be the worst stage of the race. The terrain was not in any way conducive to running – lumpy, rocky, gnarly, undulating, horrible. Often you'd get a 5 yard run then have to scramble. Turns out Loch Lomond is very long as well however after around 15 miles of fun I reached Beinglas Farm and checkpoint 2 coming in 78th. Unfortunately Kris had experienced a reoccurrence of a leg problem and was forced to pull out having been placed in the top 10 for most of the first 42 miles.

Stage 3 was much calmer and whilst gradually uphill passed with some ease and it seemed no time before I was at the halfway point and onto the next stage to Bridge of Orchy. This was a great stage for me. Gradually uphill then gradually downhill and one of my fastest split times saw me arriving at Bridge of Orchy in 42nd place.

En route to Bridge of Orchy we were greeted by the view of Jelly Baby Hill which looked about the size of Everest and was characterised by a group standing on the top handing out jelly babies. As I approached after a beast of a climb I was greeted by the melodic harmony of Star Wars played on a penny whistle. Bizarre yet fantastic breaking up the loneliness of the race which had now thinned out to only meeting the occasional runner. Downhill was followed by the trek across Rannoch Moor. A stunningly desolate wilderness but also a gruelling 7 mile march uphill. This was not my favourite stage!

After a fuel stop in Glencoe Ski Centre (70 miles down, just a marathon to go!) the route descended to the main road and along to the Devil's Staircase. The short break had caused my legs to seize and they were not willing to run down the hill only beginning to behave when we got to a flat section. I underestimated Devil's Staircase, I guess the clue is in the name, and told myself it was no worse than the Souths Downs. Turns out it is a lot worse. More disheartening was that the descent into Kinlochleven was so rocky, steep and gnarly that with legs losing their ability to resist meant most of that was also conducted at walking pace. It is also a long way down, so long that I was convinced I was lost.

By now I had lost any appetite so the final checkpoint was brief. You are weighed occasionally for health and safety reasons. I was down 2kg, roughly 3%, so passed to continue and set off after the briefest of breaks to refill bottles. Well I thought the Devil's Staircase was tough. The climb out of Kinlochleven up to the Larig Mor was unexpectedly tougher and I think I logged my slowest mile (including rest stops), at 26 minutes getting up this one. To then be greeted by a 3 mile uphill path once I had 'summitted' did not put me in an emotionally good place. With less than 15 miles to go it's that stage in an ultra where you just want it to end.

However, the good news is that once up that it's a gentle roll downhill to Lundavra and an intermediate timing point where I was greeted by Trish who then ran with me the last 7 miles to the finish. Advertised as downhill all the way the first 2 miles were distinctly uphill leading to the occasional verbal 'complaint' on my part. The last 4 miles into Fort William were however downhill and on a forest trail. We picked up the pace, rather painfully, and rolled into the finish just after 11pm on the same day I'd started just as darkness was settling in.

It had taken 22 hours and 10 minutes and I placed 37th overall. I had a goal of breaking one day and an aspirational target of 23 hours which would mean I finished on the same day as starting. I don't really know how I managed to exceed these goals but I had a terrific support crew and decent pacing. This truly is one of the toughest things I have done but equally one of the most memorable and enjoyable, especially in hindsight! I'd recommend to anyone that is that way inclined.