

2019 RONHILL WEST HIGHLAND WAY RACE

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Friday, 21st of June 2019

It was the longest day of the year and I spent it all in bed, with the longest lie in I had in months and a 3-hour afternoon nap. I took some food between sleeps, but not too much - some boiled potatoes with chicken, some strawberries, and plenty of water. I sat with Noel watching Pixar's film 'Ratatouille' while I was waiting for the hours to pass.

I felt remarkably calm all day but, when Tim and Ali came to pick us up, the nerves started to kick in.

We arrived in Milngavie pretty early for registration (around 10pm). I usually love a pre-race buzz, hugs and chats with my running pals, but this evening I didn't want to see anybody until the very Start. I didn't want to look at anyone's kit, or shoes; I just wanted to get my registration sorted then sit in the car and stay quiet, focus. I almost forgot to take my pre-race photo in front of the WHW banner!



Nerves and excitement are kicking in

I had put together a very well organised and detailed plan. I knew what I was going to want (at least, until Tyndrum) and what I was expecting from my Crew. They all agreed the plan helped a lot as all they need to do was following it. I had packed kit for any weather conditions, and food for any taste I could crave for. Was my training enough? Yes, it was - both the physical and the mental training. Of course I could have done more strength work, more stretching, eaten a bit better during the training months. However, someone in the podcasts has said that 'your body is perfect as you are to do this' and I was removing my concerns with that thought.



It's going to be teamwork!

Saturday, 22nd of June 2019

At 00.40, the race briefing was done. Now I could feel my heart pumping against my stomach... like before every uni exam, every job interview, every longest race I faced before. I reminded myself Noel's words, 'Have you ever failed anything important in your life?' and my Nana's words, 'You are a *testa dura*. Of course you will complete it!'

Milngavie to Balmaha

I am and we were off! I really enjoyed this section. I felt it went really fast and Conic Hill arrived very quickly. I was feeling great compared to the night run I did with Noel at the end of May, taking the last train to Milngavie after a busy day at work and running to Balmaha and then to Balloch in order to catch the first train back to Edinburgh. That run stood me in good stead both for practising the section and for getting an idea of how it feels running after being awake for 24 hours. And, unlike that night run, I was feeling rested and food was going down well (I had 2 mini rolls).



Hot tea is amazing!

Balmaha to Rowardennan

At Balmaha, my Crew executed the 'Ferrari pit stop' (as requested) perfectly. Poor souls they were all wearing their midge nets, while I wasn't needing that for running as the midges were not that bad on the move. Ali asked me if I had any requests that were different from the plan - nope, all according to plan! - and took me to the car. I had a quick change from my long sleeve top to a t-shirt and off I went, Noel walked me out of the check point as I was eating my delicious home made porridge.

Going towards Rowardennan, it was pretty beautiful. I just remember being focused and enjoying the runnable section. Loch Lomond was like a mirror, it was certainly a fine morning for it!



Loch Lomond

Rowardennan to Inversnaid

My focus here was the Low Road, an alternative section to the High Road I had run during my previous Fling races. I had never been on that bit before, and as I was prepared for it to be a 'Loch Side preview' and to take a bit longer due to its technicality. Despite this, I honestly thought it was quite lovely. My IT band had been a bit sore from getting down Conic, so focusing on the terrain was actually a good way to forget about it. When the trail turned away from the shore and climbed up into what it looked like an enchanted forest, Jan passed me looking really strong. I was feeling a little tired there and also very thirsty, but I promised myself a refreshing can of Coke later if I kept pushing towards Inversnaid.

Inversnaid to Beinglas

I arrived at Inversnaid slightly later than my prediction, but I was confident I could pick it up a little bit as I had allowed myself plenty of time for the Loch Side. Coke did miracles and gave me a boost. Loch Side was okay but I soon named it as the 'Loch Shite', I think because I was really thirsty and getting delirious by this point. Never happened on that course before, I was feeling really hot at the top of the climb as I said Hi to Dario and looked back at that stunning view of Loch Lomond... I was trying to drink to thirst as per race medic's advice, however I felt I was still taking in a lot of water and I was worried I would find out I'd have water retention at the next weigh-in point at Auchtertyre. So I would drink a sip with food, but I would also take a bigger intake of water to rinse my mouth and spit it out.

Beinglas to Auchtertyre

Not sure if I said "We have made to Beinglas, gal!" just in my head or loud voice as I climbed the stile over the fence. The checkpoint brought back happy Fling memories, as I jogged past John

Fling carrying a big tank of water and I felt really grateful for the amount of work and dedication I have seen him putting into an event several times this year (back to the Fling training camp in March!). I also said Hi to Ian Beattie, who made sure I was okay as I downed my third Coke and walked out of the checkpoint with half a sandwich in my hands. Then, I was to enjoy what I earned after 'Loch Shite': the open spaces, the cheerful team at Bogle Glen, and the Rollercoaster through the beautiful Crinlarich forest. I was power walking the ups and running the downs. I told myself to try and run for 1 km, then I managed to run for 2 or 3: energy levels were there! I was also looking forward to meet my Crew, though.



Ali is ready to run with me

Auchtertyre to Bridge of Orchy

Before the excitement of reaching Auchtertyre got me, I remembered to think about Fraser and spare a moment for his dad. I was going to think about Fraser twice today: here and at the top of the Devil's Staircase, looking back at Glencoe. Fraser inspired me to attempt this race, he is my running guru.

At Auchtertyre, first I saw Tim in the distance. He gave a thumbs up and opened his arms and I replicated those gestures to say 'I am here! I am fine!!' adding a big smile. Once I got to him, he took me through the checkpoint. As I was weighed, I found out that I had lost 5kg so I felt glad I was now allowed to drink a bit more. The Crew had prepared an amazing checkpoint, they had even fresh strawberries! I ate them together with two rice puddings. I can't remember photos and videos being taken by Tim and Noel but I am grateful they did so, as I can recall fun memories now. I had a quick change of t-shirts and off I went with Ali.



Support from the Italians

I was feeling stronger with a support runner, even if this part was No Man's Land for me. I had never been North of Tyndrum before.

Ali was just fantastic. Of course, it's Ali! She really kept me going strong all the way to Glencoe. Noel had collected some audio messages from my family, so Ali played my parents first. Then a video from my best friend in the world, Sarah, telling me to keep breathing as she was going to be with me all the way. This made me emotional but I didn't cry. There was work to be done! Ali encouraged me to make the most of the runnable section to the next checkpoint, and I am glad she pushed me as we arrived at Bridge of Orchy bang on target at 14 hours in.

Bridge of Orchy to Glencoe



We stopped so much traffic for this pic!

Climbing up Jelly Baby Hill, I had my euphoria moment. Ali was using her 'scales 1 to 10' to assess how I was feeling in my body and in my spirit, and I replied I was 7/8 in body and 10 in spirit! Not bad, 100 km in. It wasn't just to show my family that I was feeling fine through a few video messages, I was truly enjoying running and the happiness of that moment. Ali and I were giggling

like during one of our running dates. We started singing a silly song, 'If I was a Jelly Baby would I live on Jelly Baby Hill', and we were climbing loud and proud until we reached Murdo. He said I was the happiest runner he had seen on the day, as I jumped at him apologising for the 'honkin' hug and thanking him for the delicious jelly baby.

As we proceeded, we got to the Rannoch Moor and the Drove Road. Ali acknowledged it was going to be a tough section to run, but we took that section as it was and it was actually a great opportunity to have a long overdue catch up - we talked about family, boyfriends, training, races, trips... while doing a good power walk up. This way I actually managed to tackle it with positivity, despite the tiredness and arriving in Glencoe about 1 hour after target. I loved my time with Ali, she was just perfect!

Glencoe to Kinlochleven



Why we run

Despite being behind schedule at Glencoe, we executed our checkpoint plan smoothly. Hot food (noodles with parmesan tasted amazing!) and change of buff as Tim was showing me some video messages from friends cheering me up. A lot of the videos were featuring dogs too! Gavin's message about pain being temporary was an appreciated surprise, as well as Scott and Anna's, Jenny's, Gilly's, and Aldo's. Ross's video was perfectly timed, as he invited me to get up and keep going even if I was sore - it would be all worth it! I got up and off I went with Timbo.

Tim made the section sound really easy to do: 'We have to go 7k up and 7k down'. Nevertheless, he reminded me we were in a race and I was going to overtake people! As we climbed up the Devil's Staircase we overtook two runners, and it was really helpful to listen to the voice messages from the Race Fitness gang...thanks so much everyone! Once at the top, the views were mozzafiato and they reminded me how lucky we were to be there!



Mozzafiato. Breathtaking.

Now the downhill started, the down I had been described to me as really hard on the legs. Again, Tim gave me his confidence boosting instructions: relax the body, use the gravity, you are recovering as you are going down. These made the task feel really smooth and easier than predicted. As I told him, 'there's only one pair of legs in the world I would want to borrow right now: Kat's legs!' - she's the best I know at downhills - Tim made me listen to her message, which was the sweetest.

As we approached Kinlochleven, Tim made a phone call to Ali and Noel, making it sound like a fancy order for a fancy diva: portion of salty chips, coke, fluid top up and foot service please. This made laugh out loud!



Couldn't ask for better service!

Kinlochleven to Lundavra

I had a fairly long stop at Kinlochleven (15 minutes passed), but it was all necessary: weigh in (I had taken a little weight back, so I needed to eat as well as drink from now on), bra had started chafing so I needed a quick change, and as I was eating my chips Tim and Ali were on foot care. It was funny how I politely told Tim that he had put the left sock on my right foot and vice versa! The change of shoes and socks here made me feel so much better. The salty chips tasted divine.

Finally, it was Noel's turn. This was going to be the home stretch. Next checkpoint, Fort William! Everything had gone really well so far and I had just to keep my game up for one last section. For the first time during that long day, I stated thinking a little about how many km were left. They still

felt like a lot! I tried to take that number away from my head by having a good catch up with Noel about the previous stages of the race.

We were going pretty well up the long climb after Kinlochleven. The sky was glowing with pink colours and Noel was cheering me up with a few more messages from the family - nonni, cousins, all telling me to keep going! Only one small group of runners was ahead of us and it was daunting as they disappeared into the distance, however Noel took out a speaker and started playing some music. I had the energy to sing some little parts, and very soon we were at the top of the hill with Jeff Smith and the fizzy drink.



Getting dark

After that, it became tough work. Going downhill was twice as painful than going up, and as the darkness came I became grumpy. Poor Noel! I could feel my right knee didn't want to bend any more, I was actually limping at every step down. I could feel my feet getting bigger blisters at every stream crossing, and it felt like there were millions of them. The phone battery died, and I was digging myself a hole! I was trying to remind myself about keep burning the ships (= excuses, as Debbie calls them in the WHW Race podcasts) and I was saying to Noel that I wouldn't want to be anywhere else in the world but there in that moment with him. Noel was tired but he was giving me plenty of strength talks - I was one, now two steps close to Fort William, and I was destroying the West Highland Way, and I was his West Highland Babe, and reminded me of all the people who had doubted me but I was proving them wrong! We dedicated a km to Zio Vittorio, my 102-year-old great uncle who cannot walk any more, so we ran a km for him.

Lundavra to Fort William

It was a shame I was in a really grumpy place when we passed Lundavra - so I just checked in my timing card and carried on. I didn't even take the picture at the photo boot. My apologies to all the marshals there for not acknowledging how beautiful your checkpoint was!

The section after that was long, dark, and grim. We were silent just until we found one last marshal. We were 6 km away.

I don't know why I got so attached to the thought that, according to my Garmin, we had only 2-3 km to do - but clearly, we had more. Somewhere on the fire road, I was having a tantrum that the count was wrong! Anyway, Noel had the brilliant idea to take the speaker out again, and we listened to the few messages I hadn't received yet. A message from my best pals at uni! They were so uplifting that I whispered 'again, please' so Noel played it a second time. Then, the music. That was

the turning point. Noel put 'How far I'll go' from Disney's Moana, and I started singing. The legs started running! Running and singing! It worked! I was running home!

We sang a few more, including 'I love my life' from Robbie Williams and 'Try Everything' from Shakira. Perfect words. As we got into Fort William we passed at least 3 other runners. Ali and Tim met us about a mile to go, as it was not obvious to find the new Finish, and they trotted along with us. It was going to be the perfect team finish!, especially with Born to Run playing on the speaker.

Sunday, 23rd of June 2019

I didn't sprint to the Finish, I just kept it steady until the end. I had the warmest welcome from those kind people - they were there for me in the middle of the night! There I was in Fort William, 24 hours and 48 minutes after! What an adventure.

I was soon sitting down on a chair, and given some toast and tea. People I know came over to congratulate me. I don't remember everyone, but I do remember Lois and Adrian. Later on I found out that Ali interviewed me just after the finish, as I don't remember that happening!

I have very sporadic memories of what happened between the time when my legs stopped running the race and started running again – in bed. I remember a taxi being called to take me to the Travelodge (half a mile away). A pretty uneventful shower (Body Glide works!) and the biggest blisters I have ever seen! I had the weirdest dreams about the WHW being a big treasure hunt in which people had to collect jelly babies.



96 miles

The prize giving on the Sunday at noon was a very special moment. The hall at the Ben Nevis centre was crowded as I hobbled in. While I had the luxury of a few hours' sleep, some runners had only finished 30 minutes before! The atmosphere was electric. I don't think I have ever seen such a gathering of inspiring people! I was pleased to see that my friends also completed the race: Jan finished well under the 24 hours, and Erica proved to be such a strong lady as she kept going despite being ill for most of the race. I recognised many other faces, as Ian Beattie called them one by one to collect their goblets. John Kynaston was there, and I gave him a big smile – to say thank you for his podcasts, which I have been listening daily since January and have been such a helpful source of information for planning the race as well as good company during long runs. Sean the race medic was also there, I had found his presence reassuring through the whole race.

As my name was called in the 87th position, I came forward. Finally, I received my goblet! I gave Adrian a hug and hobbled to the photo panel, with the biggest smile on my face. I was also chuffed to bits to learn I had come 9th female!



'On a scale 1 to 10, with 10 being absolutely ecstatic and deliriously happy and 1 being miserable, where are you?' '100!'

I could have never ever been there without my Crew, the best I could ever ask for. Thank you Ali, Tim, and Noel from the bottom of my heart.

