

West Highland Way Race 2019

Race Report by Karen McIndewar

Finish position – 143rd

I've never really looked upon myself as a 'proper' runner.....not one to be constantly chasing times or podiums; I'll never be up there and I'm fine with that..



I just run as I enjoy it, although I do enjoy a challenge. Finishing races are my aim and PB's are all a bonus.....

Running this race I guessed was the next progressive step up from the Fling and Devils race and before I knew it, the ballot was entered. I hadn't really thought much about what would be involved training wise and consequences surrounding a race of such significant mileage. I had no real doubt that mentally I could cope, but the physical side was a whole other issue, especially when I am an individual who needs their sleep to function. So here I was with a ballot place, stepping into the unknown.

Training was slow and because I am very much a fair weather runner, building the motivation through the winter months and Storm X, Y and Z were my forever excuse; however, that undoubtedly melted into enjoyment when I did actually get myself out on the trails. Attending the informal training run in January and weekend camp were great to meet likewise individuals. I devised a spreadsheet with fairly accurate estimates; for the first half of the race anyway. The second half were much more generous timing and into the realms of 'we will see how it goes'.....

As the weather started to pick up, my enthusiasm to get out grew, however with every 24 hours passing race day was fast approaching and I was not where I wanted to be with training. My mileage wasn't as high as some people, due to injuries, but I was trying to be sensible and remembering I was going to be running my own race. I had entered a number of ultras prior to the WHW and was running these as a 'take it as it comes' race. Disaster struck as I sustained a bad rib injury during the Fling and another bad fall at the Catheran 55; although as mentioned, I am pretty mental, so I still tend to push through races injured and even bagged a PB at the Fling!

My mind was in overdrive though; the panic of injury, but I was thinking logically and realistically, resting and pacing myself. These injuries resolved, but then developed a sore hip and backside 4 weeks before the big day.....I literally had a pain in the a**e; so a couple of intensive physio treatments in the 2 weeks prior to the race were required...yet another concern for me even before reaching the start line.

I'd tried to fuel and hydrate well in the weeks leading up, but my already poor sleep pattern had not improved any.

Friday came and I'd been up since 9.30am, still organising drop bags and packing into the late afternoon. Hairdresser was delayed, so I spent nearly an hour twiddling my thumbs in a salon instead of a desired nap.....I was getting picked up by my crew at 9pm and I was still



faffing. Not much I could do about it now. David Murray and Lynda arrived bang on time, so once the car was loaded (I never travel light) off we went to pick Lynsey McLaughlin up and head to registration. We got there early and after checking in sat and relaxed in the car, where I had a porridge and banana. Back across to the hall again after midnight and another trip to the toilet. I was beginning to worry about this; I can always tell if it is going to be a good or bad race by how often I need to pee from the off, but thankfully, it was looking like a 'good race day', as my first stop would be at Rowardennan.

So after a poignant briefing and hugs from my support crew, it was a tense, but exciting wait at the start line for that 1am send off. I started somewhere around the middle as I didn't want to be sucked into going off too fast, but as it turned out, this is exactly what happened. My legs felt good and fresh and as I'd switched off all my alerts on the watch and didn't want to waste battery power I had no idea what pace I was running; I just went with how I felt in that moment....It looked amazing with all the head torches twinkling on the road to Drymen. I flashed by my crew who had stopped at the Beech Tree Inn, only after then glancing at my watch to see I'd run 7.7 miles in around 80ish minutes.....Ooops! I was still feeling good, so only slowed my pace a little.

Coming off the grassy hill near to the Drymen checkpoint I was unfortunately downwind of an island road runner team member at the wrong time.....Bleuuuuurk.... that cloud of methane certainly woke me up!!

I'm glad I was quite familiar with the route, as runners were beginning to spread out now, but at least it was starting to get a little lighter.



I began to feel horrid by the time I reached Conic, which I think was due to me overheating, as once I stopped and removed my jacket and winter arm sleeves, that wave of nausea disappeared. I saw Angus Alston pass me at this point, when I was busy taking in the views and pictures on the hill. I think it had just gone 4:15am and was a beautiful sight. I'd sent a thumbs up message to let the crew know I was on the descent and they were waiting with my porridge pot and larger hydration vest all ready loaded. Into checkpoint; position 124 in 3hours 37 minutes. Changed my tshirt and sleeves here too. The midges weren't too annoying at this point but still, I didn't wait too long at this checkpoint before hugging my crew and they sent me on my merry way.

I was cheered on by Michele Osbourne who was waiting for husband Jeremy. One of a number of times I would see her enthusiastic presence on the route.

We had pre-agreed the next time I would see my crew was Auchtertyre as I wanted them to have a good rest.

We couldn't have had it any more perfect with weather and conditions. I saw Jan Dawson catching up, overtaking me, then her hearing impaired runner sign disappeared into the distance down the tarmac after Balmaha. A few other people passed me after refuelling.

Seeing Loch Lomond at 6 in the morning was serene and breathtaking....the still and calm water, everything looked picture postcard.

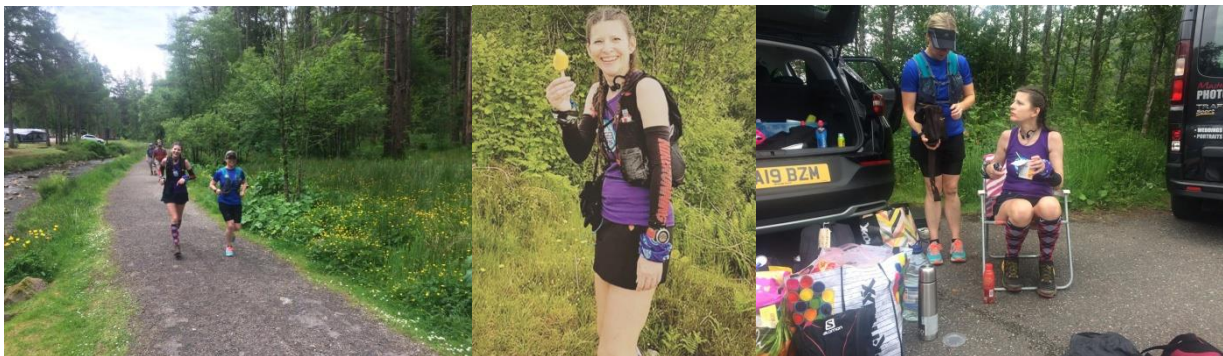
Reached Rowardennan 1 hour 56 minutes later. Another stop where I didn't linger long due to the midge invasion. Seeing Donna Pass and Lois Simpson was a welcome boost. I dotted along the lochside; no tourists, no conga line, just me, completely alone with my thoughts and I was feeling strong, loving climbing up and down the rocks. Another brief rest at Inversnaid and then I trundled along for more fun on the lochside. I stopped off for a few seconds to glide my hand over Dario's post and take in the view, just as one runner had done in front of me, followed by the runner behind.

There were a few other guys dotted down the hill and I hadn't felt this climb as tough as previous races, which was a good sign.

The never-ending few miles to Beinglas still felt as never-ending and it was really starting to heat up, but I had been fuelling pretty well. Took me just over 4 hours from the last official checkpoint. Seeing Johnny Fling and his team cheered me up and I stopped there to have another porridge pot, taking advantage of their hot water urn. I left checkpoint at the same time as Tony Whitaker and we ran like a tag team for the next 8 or so miles, much like Emma Bryce who was on this leg of the race too. Had a little chuckle when 2 elderly gentlemen on this stretch were asking how many miles I was planning doing that day....they were a tad surprised when I chirpily replied 96!

I wasn't hallucinating either when I passed Keith Hughes on all fours, splashing around in the river. He was half stripped and enjoying a dip.

Everything in my brain and body screeched to a halt as I hit the wall around the path known as Coo Poo Alley; the ground was starting to ripple and move under my feet and I was thinking oh crap, I've still got 50 odd miles to go and I'm struggling to stay awake.....thankfully that running on empty feeling flicked like a switch coming off the rollercoaster and it wouldn't return so intensely, but nausea was to feature on and off throughout the rest of the race. I had passed for a second time Tony and Emma on the rollercoaster, both saying they were struggling with knee issues. My hip was holding out and no real knee pain, so I was cheerful. The only time I put some music on was in the last few miles to Auchtertyre, where Lynsey was to be taking on the first support running stint, which was great to start spending some more time with friends... I'd lost about 2 kilo at weigh-in, which I would have put back on by the time I reached Kinlochleven



I don't know who gave me the Solero ice lolly at Tyndrum, but it was a tasty welcome! The miles clocked quicker with the chat. Emma passed me once more, with her knee strapped up and was still moving at a faster pace than me. I had been fuelling quite well, but was beginning to tire by the time I reached Bridge of Orchy. The team were waiting for me patiently, to feed me up and yet again the only thing I wanted was porridge.

Each checkpoint the team worked well together to get me fed, hydrated, sprayed and back out without too long a pit-stop and I don't think I was ever too demanding! My estimated times had been pretty accurate, but these would be a distant thought by the time left Glen Coe checkpoint.

Daniel Kershaw and Alison Downey took over their support running role at BoO and banter was good.....they went at my pace, which although I was still well within my estimated times, was starting to slow..... Cyndi Shettle was looking good passing us on the hill out of BoO, I would pass her while she was sorting a blister, then she was to pass me at a later point on the moor, never to be caught again.



I received my jelly baby from Murdo and touched the 100K mark stone. Was hoping for a black one, but think I was presented with a red one; still, it tasted good. The reverse sweepers passed us on Rannoch Moor and my plans for the toilet stop I had used during the Devils were scuppered when some guy popped up from the mounds blowing up some sort of lilo! (no I wasn't hallucinating), so had to try and find some other worthy mound on the moor....not an easy feat!

Robin Pate had passed us earlier, appearing in fine form, but looked like he was now struggling and indicated his ankle was painful.

I think Jagoda may have cheerfully bound past me somewhere along the moor, which was nice as I had seen her by the main road at Auchtertyre and wondered if she had pulled out. Rowena McIntosh stormed by us on the approach to Glen Coe; she was looking very strong and it was around this point my watch battery died, but I hadn't noticed, so was slight delay in starting my back up watch.



My support runners were keeping in touch with the crew about my food intake. I was fancying chips but I really couldn't face food by the time I got to checkpoint, however knew I had to force it to cope with the more challenging half.....Both Davids met us and after I'd dibbed in at checkpoint my heart sank when David M informed me his car was up near the centre.....aaargh, another hill to climb!! (I guess though it was nearer the toilet!)

I got a welcoming hug from Stacey Holloway, who was to give me another before we headed off again, but this was not before I was attempting to shovel down a pot noodle (which actually did taste good) and drink my umpteenth can of coke. I changed t-shirt again here

and decided to take my contact lenses out having spent the previous 2 checkpoints applying eye drops, so thought the rest would do my eyes good and got the old specs on.

Daniel was continuing on and David Downey took over from Alison and the 2 boys put their best feet forward and onward to the end. I knew I was in safe hands to have them at this stage due to their experiences and knowledge on hills etc and were perfect gentlemen through what were some extremely tough miles..... The climb up the Devils staircase was hard going. My quads were fine, but I think due to exhaustion, my heart was racing and I had to keep stopping for micro breaks. A number of people passed me on the climb up and this was starting to dishearten me, as I'd been pretty strong up until then.

I could have sworn there were a couple of boulders that had been painted to look like sheep; either that or my mind was starting to play tricks on me.

The views of sunset from the top of the Devils over the ridges was another stunning sight.....I was a bit hard on myself that my estimated times had gone out the window by then, mainly due to horrendous blisters and pain in my feet, having more than 70 miles in



them, but I just dug in and continued on..... My feet had been starting to get sore around Glen Coe, but I didn't want to disturb my compression socks as they and my feet were dry. I'll never know if that had any bearing on my overall performance in the second half, or if stopping to plaster the blisters and change socks or shoes would have made any real difference as I was feeling every stone under my feet in the later stages.

Jennifer Smith was powering down the hill at the ice factory and I was feeling like I was letting everyone down as I was reduced to a pathetic shuffle by this point. Kinlochleven was one of only 2 real low points, where I was really struggling with tiredness.....David M, who was a star throughout and the girls made sure I was okay. After a trip to some proper toilets, I ate a banana, looking like a child being force fed an item of food they detested and downed a can of red bull before heading off for the last 15 miles, passing Ross Beveridge who was laying down in the back of his van for a power nap. Wise move...but I just wanted to plow on and get finished as I knew these miles were going to be hell....and complete hell they were! It was the same story climbing out of KLL, having to stop often and sit on a stone.

The boys were so patient with me and I felt really bad as I was continuing to slow. Going across the Lairig Mor was a nightmare. My feet were screaming and we were dancing and hoping over stones on the waterlogged path, under spotlight. The boys were linking arms to keep me upright on some stretches; but in amongst it all we did manage to muster some humour and I did surprise them when I very occasionally broke into a jog.

The trail of head-torches looked magical but were slowly making progress on catching me, which many did. Ross caught up with me at the juice van, looking as tired as I felt, but he

stormed ahead with Gilly and would finish almost an hour quicker than me. My other watch battery had died somewhere along the route, so I was keeping fingers crossed the boys' watches didn't malfunction!

I think all 3 of us were relieved to reach Lundavra, where we were treated to more fizzy juice and sweets. Those last 8 miles, although relatively smooth / flat in comparison were just as tough and the boys were really taking their support roles to the max. Whenever I asked how far, I was met with, 'just around the corner', 'over there', 'not very far'. I was very conscious that my mood was reaching a level which would soon break; so I was really appreciative of David and Daniel's patience, as I must've sounded like a broken record! I think I may have been hallucinating a bit when I was convinced a couple of trees were evenly decorated with plastic bags and seives; however, was assured it was just tree stumps.



To see David M and Lynsey come to greet us in that final stretch, along with Alison, made it even more special and they were continually watching the clock, to push me over that finish line. I really don't know where I found the energy to sprint the last hundred metres or so, but I did and managed to get in under 29 hours at 28:59:31; clock time 05:59am, Sunday 23rd June after being awake for almost 45 hours; so I amazed myself turning down a massage in favour of sleep, which were the best 2 hours before getting ready for

the goblet ceremony, which was a fantastic gathering.



In the grand scheme I hadn't dropped that many positions from the first checkpoint and it was still just within my estimated finish time, although I'm sure I could have finished a good few hours earlier had my feet decided to play ball, but I achieved my goals for the race which were: -

1. to finish (before I turned 50) and

2. not to fall over!!!



My crew were amazing before, during and after the race (all pictured here with the exception of Lynda). I could not have achieved this experience without them and cannot thank them enough for their support on my journey and for what I put them through with their lack of sleep and a long, slow second half.

I do believe 2 are considering entering the ballot for next year, so I obviously didn't put them off and there are still willing volunteers again.

Now.....I'm off to taper again.....the Devil's awaits.....

Pic credits: myself, David Murray, David Downey, Alison Downey, Daniel Kershaw and Lynsey McLaughlin.