

Neil Ramsay – West Highland Way Race – June 2019

Main Cast (in order of appearance):

Michelle Young	Core Crew	Checkpoint Crew & Support Runner (3) KLL-FTW
Alan McDonald	Core Crew	Driver & Fixer
Steven Bunch	WHW Finisher	Support Runner (1) AUCH-GLC
David Hanna	Trailblazer	Support Runner (1) AUCH-GLC
Alistair Robinson	Day Tripper	Support Runner (2) GLC-KLL
Steve Murray	Day Tripper	Support Runner (2) GLC-KLL

2018. My second WHW improved on the first in 2017 by 5 Hours 50 Minutes – coming 96th / 198 finishers in a time of 25:31. I was satisfied with this time and doubted I could improve on it greatly, I had sworn I would not return to the WHW until such time as all rocks were removed and a decent carpet laid. Michelle had agreed to enter the WHW and I could therefore look forward to crewing instead of running but she had not yet completed any qualifying races – meaning if I didn't enter we would not have a runner in 2019 – come November I entered the ballot and was lucky to be offered a place; WHW-3 was on.

Before. As previously my WHW year started in January at the Oak Tree training weekend with Dave, Barry and Michelle. I managed an out and back to Inversnaid (30 miles) in reasonable time and condition on Saturday followed by a good night getting into a less favourable condition in the bar. On the Sunday Michelle and I decided to run Milngavie to Balmaha (19 miles) so that she had covered this pre-Fling (Highland Fling is a race from Milngavie to Tyndrum, first 53 miles of the WHW). In hindsight this was a bad move, we were both too tired from the previous day's miles and pints to manage anything other than a slow plod – which only served to give Michelle the false impression that this stage, and especially climbing Conic hill, was a tough section.

This year I chose not to enter the Fling ballot, having run the race for the last 4 years I felt it would be good to have a change and if I'm honest this was perhaps also a little cowardly – I knew from previous years that my Fling performance would hugely affect my feelings about the WHW; if I done well I'd feel buoyed but if I struggled and slowed compared to last year this would become an irrationally all-consuming worry. Michelle got her Fling place and stormed round in April to beat my PB, qualify for the 2020 WHW ballot, and take ownership of yet another 'crown' in what I would like to call the competition between us were I actually able to mount any sort of challenge.

Last year I followed a loose training plan which involved relatively short but frequent runs – this year I covered increased training miles but went out a little less, doing more long runs and back to back training weekends. Michelle and I completed the Southern Upland Way (217 miles) over 9 days and covered the full WHW route, I ran the Kielder Ultra in April and Glen Lyon in May. In retrospect I don't think this was the optimum approach for me; I was heavier and felt less race fit despite upping my pre-WHW mileage from a weekly average of 30 in 2018 to 32.5 this year. This is a comparatively low training mileage for WHW contenders but I suffered from a knee complaint all year and am convinced that anything higher would have been an unnecessary injury risk. I constantly tinkered

(pointlessly really, it ended up pretty much the same as where it started) with my race plan spreadsheet; finally settling on a 24-hour plan which was achievable but optimistic.

Time done that thing it occasionally tends to and flew by – race weekend was here and I had the Friday off work. I shopped for the weekend, cooked, packed, prepared kit, and then went to bed around 15:00 to try sleeping. Having failed (as per '17 & '18) to get any sleep I was up at 21:00 – hopefully the rest and quiet was beneficial, although I am sure that if I could only have managed a couple of hours sleep this would help greatly, I don't like the night start but understand the rationale, which I assume is most daylight for most participants. Showered and fed (a more modest meal of Pizza this year) I was only running very slightly late when Michelle turned up at 22:00 for the off. We drove through to Milngavie via Alan's to collect him and were at registration in good time. We went off in search of a coffee, McDonalds was open and having taken over as driver Alan began what proved to be a tedious weekend of stalling, gear box assault, 50-point turns and woeful parking. Returning to the station we ran through the plan, kit and food before heading over to hear the race brief. Bunchy and Shanita turned up having been at a wedding reception nearby to wish us well – remaining sober (Bunchy) in readiness for support running tomorrow was above and beyond, although given his performance across Rannoch Moor I'm not sure it done much good. I moved over to the start line, initially standing at the very front – I briefly spoke to racing snake Dave Hay and then shuffled back a bit into the pack to wait for the off. This race is very simple really; run up Milngavie High Street – turn right at Greggs – stop in Fort William 96 miles later. At precisely 01:00 it began...



During. 01:00

Milngavie – Balmaha (time of day, 04:16). Starting out in Mugdock Park I was neither braking or pushing particularly but just jogging along, falling into step with a couple of guys ahead of me going

at a reasonable pace. I'm an unsociable runner – I can't deliver respectable movement and talk simultaneously and am always slightly envious of runners able to distract themselves from the misery of exercise with a chat. I concentrated on my steps, running in the dark here it would be easy to stumble. The miles to Drymen fell away without any trouble and I was feeling okay as I crossed the road and onwards up into the woods beyond. On the approach to Conic I tripped and somehow remained upright, over-stretching my left leg far forward to rescue the fall. This seemed to sprain something in my glutes – running was literally a pain in the arse. I worried that I'd done something nasty however the feeling subsided over the next mile. I walked most of the Conic hill climb and then ran down into Balmaha. Michelle met me at the checkpoint, I also saw my sister-in-law Kate waiting for her runner, but I didn't have time to talk, with a wave and hello we walked past to the car – where, for the second year, Alan failed to be present or ready for me - words were had and will continue to be had for many years to come. Bit of porridge, bit of coffee and I jogged out with a few minutes 'banked' against plan.

Balmaha – Rowardennan (06:03). Although tired from sleep deprivation and miles ran it was dawning into an undeniably nice day – warmish, clear, not too midge ridden when on the move, all things considered the familiar loch side path was okay. There were parts on this section I was aware of going at a pretty slow pace, and struggling to get moving, but I knew that maintaining any sort of jog was probably more important than the pace of that jog – I got into Rowardennan, took my pre-stocked pack from the car, got a little more porridge down, and set out again a couple of minutes ahead of plan.

Rowardennan – Beinglas (10:01). I jogged out of the checkpoint and, like last year; decided to try keeping this going until reaching the fire road climb I knew to be lurking a mile or so up the road. The WHW takes a left onto a more technical path, the 'low road', this involves paying some attention, clambering over parts and picking your way forward, the difference from the fire road came as a welcome change and I jogged most of this until emerging back onto the fire road and onwards to Inversnaid. Previously when running to Inversnaid the hotel seemed to take forever to come into view, however today the trail passed quickly and I arrived at Inversnaid five minutes ahead of plan. I took a few minutes to sit with my drop bag, eat and drink a little and then off again towards Beinglas. The trail is at its most technical here and it can be very slow going. There was a runner who I fell into swopping places with, him passing, then me, then he was back in front. I decided once and for all to try keeping up and then overtaking, and then keeping him behind me. This was successful and it did push me along until the meadow at the end of the technical horror where I walked up the hillside and he ran past – never to be seen again. This tactic of picking someone and hanging on for as long as possible had worked last year and is effective, briefly, at setting a respectable pace. I lost some time over the latter half of this section, arriving 1 minute behind schedule, my hard-earned 'banked' minutes were spent, frittered away on a self-indulgent, self-pitying, spell of walking.

Beinglas – Auchtertyre (12:35). Perhaps as there was no crew access this year the Beinglas checkpoint put on hot and cold drinks – a coffee was warmly welcomed and I sat down for a couple of minutes. I knew my planned time for this next stage was ambitious – it meant jogging most of the way and I was perhaps performing 50/50 Run/Walk. It was a boost to reach the gate at the Crainlarich spur as this is widely acknowledged as half-way. I walked the climbs in the forest here but forced a run on downhill and flats. As I approached a walker at the side of the path taking a piss he

finished his business, shook and stored his equipment and then turned round, noticed me and 'kindly' proffered "a sweet to keep me going" – think me ungrateful, but I declined. Emerging at the A82 I was held up by traffic for a restful minute before crossing over and up the road to Auchtertyre Farm. Everyone had walked out to meet me at the field just prior to where the checkpoint was sited this year – we walked in to be met by WHW veteran Sir Alan Roberston who asked me to "whoa there" while he wrangled his mobile into taking a picture – I kept walking, this was no time for photo-calls. As Dave was now present I was not allowed to sit, I had a drink and a few mini sausage rolls (they were going down well) and chatted with the expanded crew. Bunchy was ready to run, considerably less well dressed than last night.

Auchtertyre – Bridge of Orchy (14:58). Dave, Bunchy and I set off towards Tyndrum, we fell short of being the stag-do-esque group intended as Barry Judas Lovern had gone on holiday to Iceland leaving the banter expectation weighing heavy on Dave & Bunchy. I took a bottle of Lucozade with me here – this was a mistake – jogging along shook it up so that it overflowed and was hard to down when opened, flat drinks on the move in future. Dave started out as he would go on, setting the pace and insisting I jog unless going uphill where a walk was tolerated. We passed the Fling finish at 'By the Way Hostel' and went on to Brodie's store at the far end of Tyndrum where another race on the WHW starts; The Devil O the Highlands is run in August and goes from Tyndrum to Fort William (42 Miles). Bunchy had completed the Fling and the Devil – and so by covering the short distance between the Fling finish and the Devil start line he declared himself a WHW finisher – he is still waiting in vain for his commemorative goblet. At Brodie's I changed tee shirt and took something to eat on the climb out of the village. Bunchy and Dave generally kept in front of me, trying to set the pace rather than accommodating mine which was disintegrating along with my chat and mood. This year (and previous attempts) all support runners have been so patient with me, I was not good company and only got worse as the miles passed, having said this, they did pass and we reached B.O.O in reasonable time. Alan had parked up at the train station as getting into the checkpoint was difficult – but we had agreed this was probably better anyway. I had something to eat and drink and we all trooped down to the checkpoint where I just had to 'Dib-in' before the uphill ahead. We left B.O.O 14 minutes behind schedule and 4 minutes later than 2018, something Dave was pretty determined to rectify – but with me (and Bunchy) to herd along it was a tough task.

Bridge of Orchy – Glencoe (18:07). I walked all of the climb to the summit of Jelly Baby Hill – I understand that Murdo (guy handing out Jelly Babies) is retiring from this duty but am sure the tradition will be taken up by another hardy volunteer, willing to sit in all weathers for hours on end to offer encouragement and cheer to WHW runners – thanks Murdo. The path descends steeply here to the Inveroran Hotel, a cosy place my brother Frazer and I had an overnight at when walking the WHW in a time long before the appearance of grey hairs. Dave instructed a jog to the gate at the foot of the drove road running up on to Rannoch moor – I grumbled plenty but did jog most of it. Dave patiently and persistently pushed me along, constantly negotiating stretches of running from me (and Bunchy). We were lucky with the weather and conditions were pretty ideal – in other circumstances this would be easy miles – not today. As the path turns into Glencoe and heads down to the Ski Centre I should have been able to turn in a fast mile or two but the terrain is tricky and there is no good line through the boulders and rocks that form the path. Dave and Bunchy ran ahead and I limped on in to the checkpoint to be met by my further expanded crew plus Myv (wife of Dave), Anwen (daughter of Dave) and Raven (dog of Dave), if only some energy transfer was possible

between Raven and I the remaining marathon would be easy. Despite best efforts from the lads encouraging me and maintaining some modicum of morale we were now 40 minutes behind the 24 hour plan – this genuinely did not worry me, so long as I was moving forward and not keeping everyone out for a little more than a very long walk then I was happy enough. On a WHW podcast Ian Beattie (Race Director) once mentioned how aside from personal expectations no one external really understands particular finishing times anyway, the feat of finishing the race in any time is impressive enough, where a plan slips by an hour or two this really is insignificant. Michelle forced porridge upon me which she insisted I had requested - I had not. Having dismissed the pushy porridge lady I had another coffee and a bit more to eat – I don't find eating difficult during races but probably don't take enough on-board or snack as frequently as I should.

Glencoe – Kinlochleven (21:20). We (now with Ali & Steve) left Glencoe in good spirits and at a jog. Ali's friend Steve done us both a great service by coming along; it was good for me to have their enthusiasm and company and good for Ali not to be stuck alone with me up a mountain in a mood. Alan & Michelle drove along and met us again at the foot of the Devil's staircase – with Michelle's criticism (spotted walking) ringing in my ears we headed up – I don't mind the climb at all, it is a guilt free walk, not that far, and climbers are rewarded with incredible views, though I'd prefer rewarded with a night's sleep. Up and over the staircase we began the long descent to KLL. A few sections of the path on the hillside have been smoothed out, levelled and resurfaced – not quite the carpeting I have long advocated but a welcome refinement in stark contrast to the KLL fire/access road which remains a sharp, painful, rocky affair. It was probably around here I was noticing my laces being a bit too tight (particularly on the downhills where my foot was pushed forward) but I did not want to start meddling and just left them – it is probable they were just uncomfortable because of the 80 miles covered but in future I will take a minute out to readjust, it is worth trying anything to improve conditions. Steve & Ali set the pace, mostly staying ahead of me, I prefer this to someone plodding along behind me, I think pushing rather than pulling just leads to moving at the slowest person's pace. We arrived in KLL 7 minutes later than 2018, at the time I was not conscious of this but knew I was now 1 hour behind the 24 hour plan which was not recoverable, so I let that target go here, shifting my expectation to ~25, which had been likely all along. After being weighed I had a brief seat, ate and drank a little, got my jacket (I repeatedly asked poor Alan for a jacket I had not brought) and head torch and prepared for the final push. Ali & Steve's shift finished here and they went off with Alan to have a well-earned fish supper. No such indulgence for myself and Michelle, we had the final 15 miles ahead.

Kinlochleven – Lundavra (00:16). Michelle and I walked along the road to where the climb out of town begins, giving me the chance to finish some water and snacks. We had run this section only a couple of weeks previously so everything was very familiar and overall I was feeling healthier than our recce when I was horribly hungover. We walked the climb and started a jog when the path topped out. Much of the path here is full of rubble and acts as a riverbed in wet weather – it is arduous stuff at the best of times and we were fast sinking into the worst of times. I struggled to get any sustained run going and my idea of jogging was little more than a rapid stumble forward. The weather worsened and it was blustery and wet, by ~23:00 we had to put head torches on. Around here we came across the mountain rescue/wilderness patrol pickup truck and its merry occupant who sets up an unofficial aid station halfway across the Lairig Mor. I had a quick drink and grimaced for a photo before continuing into the night. My attitude here is only thing I would really like to

change about my race and the only reason I would ever attempt this or a similar distance race again; not to do it particularly faster, but to do it nicer. I let myself become totally dejected and depressed, trudging along with no urgency or purpose and being needlessly, unhelpfully, grumpy. This is amateurish behaviour – I should know by now that the misery is only temporary, the miles will pass and keeping a positive mind-set will help. Michelle’s patience, tolerance and good humour got us to Lundavra where things did improve. There is always a party at this checkpoint; roaring fire, blaring music, cheery marshals and supplies. Alan met us here and I took my new thicker, warmer jacket for the final section. The midges were bad here, so after a quick snap at the photo-booth we set off to complete the damn thing – at least finishing was now a certainty, I knew time compared to last year was going to be tight and improvement, however miniscule, would be a personal victory – so 25:30 was the new and final target.



Lundavra – Fort William (02:25). Shortly after leaving the checkpoint Michelle glanced back to check on me and was confronted with the ludicrous sight above. I had not worn this jacket in the dark and had no idea I would look like some peculiar endangered species caught in the headlights. The undulating miles between Lundavra and the final Fort William fire road were tough – although I was just as slow I was in a much better mood than earlier as we approached the final few miles. There is a signpost at the top of the fire road to FTW – it is downhill from here. I drained my water and checked the time, we could finish ahead of last year but I would need to run. Michelle set off down the track and I followed, forcing myself to keep running although my body was insisting that I really should break into a walk, or ideally, sleep. We passed a few runners and it felt like we were charging down the hill fast although this was probably ~10/11 minute miles. I wanted to take my jacket off but resolved to keep running until we reached the main road. Somehow I found the run needed and we stopped at the foot of the hill where I took off the weird reflective pelt coat and we joined the tarmac. The finish line moved this year from the leisure centre to the Nevis centre another half mile on, I managed to keep jogging and we ran past the old finish – I didn’t know the time but knew I had to keep running. We rounded the corner at the train station – the finish was approaching. Having been pointed in the right direction by passers-by I ran down the side of the centre, and into the main hall, under the arch. Immediately afterwards I felt okay, although was convinced that when I removed my trainers my feet would expand to fill the hall. Looking at my printout I was delighted to find I had finished with a personal best, I did not care it was only 6 minutes – it was an improvement

and I'd take it as documenting a successful day (and a bit) out in the hills. I had a shower, massage, tea and toast and went off to bed conscious that runners were still out battling the miles.

WHW Take 3: 96th Position / 198 Finishers, 25:24:56



After. Following breakfast at Morrison's, where I caught up with Kate, we headed over to the prize-giving. This is always a special event and I was proud to collect my third and (almost certainly) final WHW-Goblet. On Monday after the race I got together with the full crew for a curry and pints to celebrate my finish and thank everyone for their support, speaking of which, huge thanks to;

- The organisers, marshals, volunteers, crews and fellow runners for making this happen.
- Michelle, for all the miles of training, encountering dangerous animals, faulty gravity and seeking signposts. Thanks especially for your support on the Lundavra death march.
- Alan, You can take this report as a formal written warning for repeated Balmaha failure. The matter will not be taken further in recognition of your outstanding behaviour and contributions throughout the remainder of the weekend – Thank you.
- Bunchy, Congratulations on your big WHW finish, thanks for the 1AM send off and miles of support on the day, you didn't hold me back that much, so don't feel too bad.
- Dave, Your enthusiasm and support is greatly appreciated - but then you are largely responsible for my undertaking this infectious challenge.
- Alistair, Yet again you came a very long way for a walk and lukewarm chips. Next year when Michelle makes you actually sprint up and over that hill you will remember my reign fondly as being the good old days, when 15 minutes a mile were considered rapid, Cheers.
- Steve, Next time Ali invites you for an evening out I do hope it is something involving more drinks (any would be a start) and fewer miles, thanks so much for joining us.

Next. Following 6 weeks of rest and low-mileage recovery, I had no acute injuries or issues post-WHW, I am running the Devil, Speyside, Tiree, Jedburgh and Tweed Ultras - so the training spreadsheet and miles will continue until December at least. Hopefully Michelle will secure a WHW place in 2020 and we will be back to do it all again (but doubtless considerably quicker) next year.

Thanks for reading my report, Neil.

Rosewell, 01/08/2019.