

West Highland Way Race 2011

Background

My aim was to complete the WHW race for the first time in 2010 and after a decent run in the Highland Fling I was all set. I went to Italy in May 2010 for a week to train in the hills and mountains and on day one I suffered a stress fracture in my right shin. I stupidly started the WHW race 5 weeks later and pulled out at Bridge of Orchy, unable to get down the steps to the train station. I was determined to get things right for the WHW 2011.

This year the Fling went well, I took it steady until Beinglas then tried to push the final leg. Only cramp prevented me from really gunning the last section but I was heartened to know that if I could resolve the cramp issues I'd be in good shape for the main event in June. My training continued with trips to the Lakes, a fell race, a trail race, running in the heat and long walks before a two week taper. I was fit and raring to go with an ambitious race plan to match.

Pre -Race

Having to work and then fly to Glasgow on race day wasn't ideal but could not be prevented. I registered early and then went back to my hotel to sort my kit. I just wanted to get going and disliked all the waiting around.

Milngavnie – Balmaha (20 miles).

At 1am I set off chatting to Mark Caldwell who was running well and is always good banter. The lead group belted off and a few runners chased them and I thought I would see the chasers again. I was leaping over all the puddles and streams from the day's rainfall and suddenly my left calf tightened. I've suffered with calf problems before so had a little stretch then got going again and soon enough the *too tight* running shorts of Mark Caldwell came into view. "If you keep looking at my arse then I want you to buy me a drink" shouted Mark so I jogged alongside him wishing I could wash my eyes with soapy water.

After Drymen my hamstring pulled as did my glute. I got really low and I was whinging to another runner so loudly that my support crew could hear me as I approached Ghrabadan 'Grab-your-Gran' Forest. A quick milkshake, banana and a sandwich and I was off. The Forest track was wet and muddy and I continued to mince along trying to avoid getting wet feet. My running form was no doubt compromised. I think this change of running form really affected my legs later on and contributed to the subsequent injury.

I walked up Conic Hill which I had skipped up during the Fling then took the descent into Balmaha really slowly. A few runners passed and I told them I was trying to avoid falling on my face. As soon as I said this I went down with a clatter, cutting my knee and winding myself. For a moment a once beautiful scene was filled with

obscenities. Another runner asked if I was ok as he skipped effortlessly down the path.

At Balmaha my ace support team were there with sandwiches and Nuun (saline) drinks. I told them I was struggling to get going and they booted me out the car park telling me to get a shift on as they wanted to get back to bed. Good point, well made.

Balmaha – Rowardennan (20 - 26 miles)

I love this section normally but was not feeling great. Drew Sheffield pulled alongside and we had a chat. Drew had only recently completed the GUCR (150 miles) and was looking very smooth and easy. He said he was on for a Fling PB at this pace and decided to throttle back. His chat helped me out of my glum mood and I was back on my favourite bit of track and motoring, enjoying the views. One thing about the early start is that you don't get the walking crowds by the loch and you can really fly along the track. I was going well then my hamstring pinged again. I'd left Drew by this time but decided to sit on a step before Rowardennan and just look at the view for two minutes fully expecting him to appear. I told myself to man-up and get going. I set off again had another stretch and started to run well to Rowardennan.

Rowardennan to Bein Glas (26 – 41 miles)

I caught a few guys up at this stage and then saw the dreaded cycling shorts of Mark Caldwell in the distance. I caught him up and we nattered for a good 30 minutes, pulling each other through the ups and downs into Inversnaid. At Inversnaid Mark carried on as I chatted with the Mountain Rescue folks who were having a laugh and it was rude not to join them. I was chewing on some fruit loaf whilst being chewed to death by midges. I tackled the slippery and treacherous path to Bein Glas very slowly and my hamstring started to pull again. I continued through to Bein Glas and was overtaken by a few people. At this point I wasn't bothered by time and position and phoned my crew to say that I would be an hour later than planned at Auchtetyre but all was fine and for them not to worry. I then bit into more fruit loaf and cracked my tooth on a raison stone. I'm not a believer in luck but this race was testing me.

Bein Glas to Auchtetyre. (41 – 50 miles)

I normally enjoy this section as although there are lots of climbs they are mostly runnable. Today was not as planned. A host of people caught me and I struggled to run. My legs hurt all over and I didn't know why. I jog/walked the entire section and started chatting to Debbie Consani for a stretch. She left me at the forest and breezed on to Fort William in a great time. I was now in agony on the descents but had no idea why. I called a club mate from Aros and said I thought my quads were shot due to my inability to descend but after the race they were fine, I just needed a reason for this lack of performance. Later he said I was sounding extremely miserable and was talking of quitting. Funny how you forget these things.

At Auchteyre Wigwams my new crew (my folks) were there and it was great to see them. We had a chat for a few minutes. My Dad said I was in twenty-something place but I told them both I wasn't concerned and I was just going to finish this race and to be prepared for a long stretch. I never thought at any time I would quit this race but knew a death march to Fort William was imminent.

Wigwams – Bridge of Orchy. (50 – 62 miles)

The easy trails to Tyndrum were somehow really tough and I jogged/walked them, I got through the Fling finish around 10:20 which was quicker than I thought given how poorly I was performing and feeling. I continued to jog/walk and was caught by Drew. Drew was moving well and he said his goodbyes and carried on to Bridge Of Orchy. The rain clouds were moving in and I donned waterproofs at Bridge of Orchy, preparing for Rannoch Moor and beyond.

Bridge of Orchy – Glencoe (62 -71 miles)

The long trudge began over the moor. I accepted a jelly baby from Murdo and was cheered on by his groupies. The rain lashed down and I became soaked. Streams of runners passed and by this time I could not get my legs to break into a run. One runner passed and his run was only slightly faster than my walk. He was almost bent double and kept looking back to see where I was. I thought I'd try and have a little fun so I did a bit of jogging to make sure he didn't get away and this carried on for a few miles. This little bit of sport was amusing me as he couldn't work out why he wasn't getting away. I finally gritted my teeth and broke into a run and belted past. He looked at me in horror. This was probably a bit reckless as it was the last bit of running I did but then it kept me amused in rather bleak circumstances. Mr Bent-over runner grunted past me and I didn't see him again. Fun while it lasted.

I then caught up with a hiker who was very keen to chat. He turned out to be quite religious and had strong views he wanted to share about the Old Firm (which didn't really sound very godly to me..). Needless to say I was desperate to get away but the legs didn't want to function. I eventually applied some much required walking pace and bid a hasty farewell.

Glencoe – Kinlochleven (71 – 80 miles)

Now drenched I changed into full Gortex waterproofs, woolly hat and three fleeces. I told my crew that this was now a death march but I will make it to Fort William come what may. I wasn't leaving without a goblet after last year. They told me to go for it as they weren't coming back next year. Fair one. It's a long way for them to come, two years in a row, to watch someone suffer and batter themselves. So with the thought of being sacked by my crew straight after the race I pootled along the magnificent Glencoe setting and was going quite well up the Devil's Staircase, turning back to look at the view, stunning even in the rain. I knew the drop to Kinlochleven was going to be hard on my legs and I was right. My feet were now in bits, I'd changed my socks earlier but now I feared ever looking at my feet again. I hate this

descent as it is so indirect and includes pointless height gains along the way. I remember being overtaken here by loads of people at the Devils race a couple of years ago before catching them all again later. My legs were not behaving and I kept stubbing my toes on the rocks due to my inability to lift my feet. I eventually got to Kinlochleven and asked for coffee and crisps at about 9pm.

To Fort William (80 – 95 miles)

Katy offered to support me on the final leg and I gratefully accepted. I trudged up the hill, blisters popping in my socks. I'd never experienced that before and hope not to again. It makes me gag now thinking about it. Katy dragged me over the hills and moor and we chatted to the brilliant mountain rescue guys positioned at various spots, offering lemonade and encouragement. We eventually hit Lundavra and its bonfire (90 miles) which appeared like a scene from Lord of the Rings. I wanted to have a little rest by the fire but knew it would be best to just carry on and get this over with. The rest of the event was a slow, painful trudge which is too dull to discuss with the only highlights being various hallucinations along the way. These included a car coming towards me, toilet rolls (!) and a chocolate river. I eventually got to Fort William just before 4am having been awake for 47 hours and thanked Adrian, Ian and Sean for all their efforts. The last 15 miles had taken almost 8 hours. I arrived in 26 hours 42 a full 8 hours more than planned.

Aftermath

I definitely was up there for best limp at the prize-giving and found out that I'd twisted and pulled the muscles supporting my left knee. I said my *never agains* and headed back to Glasgow airport, necking two pints of Sheepshagger (true) in a scenic pub en route.

Thanks to all involved in putting on this epic race and to my top crew who duly sacked me post race. I was determined to never be grumpy or miserable with them and hopefully achieved it as they were giving up their time for me.

Two weeks later I am still out of action. I can only guess this injury was done either leaping puddles early on or my fall at Conic Hill – or a bit of both plus poor running form.

I have my goblet now and a monkey off my back. I will be giving the Scottish ultras a wee break for a couple of years as there are so many other races and events to do but one day, maybe one day.. Next stop Chamonix and the CCC.

John Millen