

## West Highland Way Race 2009

Ever since reading Tolkein's story for children "The Hobbit" I've been fascinated by journeys and have completed some myself in the past including cycling across the United States and walking England's Pennine Way. So when I moved to Scotland in 1999 the West Highland Way noted as a possibility. I was aware of the race at that time and with a growing involvement in Ironman triathlon I started to wonder about doing the race. Getting the entry forms in 2003 I decided that I did not have enough experience to pass the vetting to get into the race and the idea was shelved. After a move to Fife my interest in triathlon waned as I discovered the Scottish hills and picked up the threads of some hill running from my younger days joining the Lomond Hill Runners in early 2007.

In 2007 I failed in my first attempt to complete the Tranter Round, but returned in 2008 to complete a solo round in 21 hours: I now felt I could convince the West Highland Way Race organisers to give me an entry.

So it was with great excitement tinged with apprehension that I lined up at Milngavie on 20 June 2009. On the surface there was a feeling of carnival but underneath there was a tension amongst runners and crews. No more time for preparation because at 1:00 AM we were off.

To tell the truth I don't remember a great deal about the race, just scenes as if from a dream.

Just after Easter Carbeth Loch I looked back along the path to see a weaving serpent of bobbing headlamps stabbing at the darkness as runners began the long journey north. Slightly later there was the surreal experience of quiet clapping and cheering at Dumgoyne where I met my support crew for the first time for a rapid Camelbak change and cup of coffee.

Through Garadhban Forest we encountered the first of the winged squadrons of carnivores that plague the traveller in Scotland. There was a brief respite from their bites on the ascent and descent of Conic Hill but in the wood above Balmaha they waited in a holding pattern at the gate for the fresh well oxygenated blood of runners and I pity the walker who had pitched his tiny one man tent right next to the path only to be woken in the very early hours by the tramp of feet.

Balmaha. A seat. And a bowl Frosties to put the Tiger back in me. "They're great". I wouldn't say that about the midges.



The first feelings of discomfort began shortly after leaving Balmaha, first tightness in the abdomen, followed by reflex salivation and rapid swallowing more associated with 10 pints of Guinness and a take away. I struggled on keeping pace with a

couple of other runners until I decided that easiest way to stop feeling sick was be sick. Nothing came out except a huge BURP, but I felt better, catching and overtaking the runners I had followed.

Rowardennan. One marathon done and still only 6:30 in the morning. Pasta. Change of socks and shirt and set off on the long leg some 19 miles to Carmyle cottage trying to make the most of the long down hills on this section. At Inversnaid I congratulated myself having made a third of the distance and opened my drop bag; unable to face the pork pie I drank the bottle of juice and took the fruit slice consuming it slowly over the next hour.

I was relieved to reach Bein Glas Farm and after a brief stop to swig some water headed on to my rendezvous at Carmyle cottage. Unsure of the parking there or whether my crew had received my text messages I could only hope that they were there. I was relieved to see the grizzled features of Uncle Alan peering down from the road and Sue and Doug at the car. I got rid of my tracky bottoms drank coffee and ate salt and vinegar crisps, taking the remainder of the crisps on the climb out of Carmyle.



The miles to Auchtertyre are tougher than you think; lots of up and down behind Crianlarich. My son ran out from Auchtertyre to meet me on the track in. At Auchtertyre it transpired I had already lost more than the allowed 4% of my body weight, but I explained I think I had been weighed with a fleece and the marshal let it pass. After a full pit stop; changing all my clothes I headed off again stiff as hell. I don't remember stopping for long to get that stiff.



I hate the section through the medial moraines from Auchtertyre to Crianlarich, and was pleased to see my son Doug at the railway station to run in with me to the road crossing where Alan was waiting to begin the leg to Bridge of Orchy with me. This didn't seem to go to bad and it was nice to run with somebody.

Adrian Davis, a previous winner and "Lomie" had pulled out at Carmyle cottage with a damaged knee and his team were there at Bridge of Orchy to meet me. It was here I teamed up with Donald my second support runner and Kenny who had been with Adrian's crew for the crossing of Rannoch Moor.



I like the crossing of Rannoch Moor having done the out and back from Bridge of Orchy to Kingshouse twice in training in both the worst and the best of conditions, but something had gone wrong. By now whenever I ate I felt not just nauseous but positively ill and the urine coloured "home brewed" drink I had used for all my training had begun to taste as it looked. Donald and Kenny patiently waited for me to drag myself over the hill to Victoria Bridge with a good stop for vomiting black gunge. (I didn't eat anything that looked like that). The crew were waiting for me but I didn't Kenny catching us up with a cup of soup that I ate most of as me made the long climb up to Rannoch Moor where I was promptly sick, bringing things up in layers: first the soup (it tasted quite good on the way up), followed by black gunge (I still don't remember eating this) followed by pasta.

This was the lowest point of the whole day; a voice inside my head commanded that I give up and that this whole race was a silly idea. But a quieter voice came through reminding of all the training and when I had felt ill on my own on the Tranter and survived the last 8 hours or so on chocolate and water.

When we spied the Kingshouse and Kenny reminded me that it sat at 72 miles I realised I had no more than a marathon to go and I knew I could make it.

At Kingshouse I think my non-running team saw me at my lowest ebb physically but inside I had come through the real battle. And as Sue attempted to teach my next pair of helpers (Laurie and Derek) the details of diabetes management I internally measured my effort against the remaining miles and ate half a cup of soup.

There is no denying I found the Devil's Staircase hard. And I'm not ashamed to admit to sitting down for a 5 minute rest, but fuelled on water and chocolate from the insistent Derek and Laurie and entertained by the endless banter I almost raced down into Kinlochleven. Where they ensured I was weighed with my Camelbak on to make the weigh in.



Fuelled with half a cup of soup and a few mouthfuls of coffee I set off again accompanied by Alan and Kenny on the lonely, never ending road to Lundavra. I remember nothing except just moving as fast as my tired legs would let me.

At Lundavra Donald and my son Doug joined me. The sub 24 was still on. However, when I explored the last section of the route I ran from Glen Nevis most of the way out to Lundavra, some how just turning around before I found out that it is

essentially a rolling climb out of Lundavra. Somehow, I just wasn't prepared for that long rolling climb out of Lundavra and I slowly worked my way down the gears to the crawler gear.

Once I the familiar ground I had explored I felt as if the pace picked up and I even predicted where we came out of the forest onto the track but the damage was done, it was 00:55, 23:55 hours since leaving Milngavie.

I ran as much as I could down the track but the legs were sore and on the road all I could manage was a fast walk, but I could feel the emotion coming. Somewhere near the corner where the leisure centre comes into sight all the pain went away and I ran. Donald and Kenny held back, Doug my son coming with me. Then I was in the leisure centre just relieved that it was all over.



I was given a cup of tea as I slowly came back from the internal place I had been since Rannoch Moor. Within five minutes the tea came back, with more black stuff (I STILL DON'T REMEMBER EATING ANYTHING THAT LOOKED REMOTELY LIKE THAT!).

I would never have made it without the care and attention of the support team that came all the way my wife Sue, son Doug and Alan from the Lomond Hill Runners and the cast of thousands who helped out from Bridge of Orchy onwards (in order of appearance) Donald, Kenny, Derek and Laurie.

No camels or tigers were harmed in this production but thousands of midges died.

**Andy Caulkett**