

# A midwinter 95 mile adventure

## **BACKGROUND**

Almost twice as long as the gestation period of an elephant, it took nearly three and a half years for this little adventure to come to fruition. The seeds of an idea had first been sown by Tim Downie, a stalwart of the West Highland Way race, in the late summer of 2006. Tim had missed the race through injury and was now proposing a "Way Highway West" in midwinter, travelling north to south, i.e. against the 'normal' direction. Reaction to his idea was almost universal that he was barking mad. 2 or 3 of us gave encouragement but I wasn't able to take the matter any further myself. The only person to swallow Tim's bait hook line and sinker was Dave 'Mad-Dog' McLelland. The two of them trained hard and, setting off from Fort William at 08.00 hrs, went on to complete the journey some 27½ hours later. To a certain extent they were fortunate to hit a particularly mild weather spell, enduring 'only' ca. 26 hours of constant drizzle. A fine achievement.

Tim's account can be accessed on

<http://www.zen31010.zen.co.uk/troontortoise/RunningtheWayHighlandWest.htm>

Fast forward ca. 18 months to mid 2008 and a small group of us were bouncing around the idea of having a go ourselves – probably south to north. Given the possibly inclement weather and the obvious risks involved, it was thought prudent to sound out the official Powers That Be, and make it kind of 'official', as well as giving it a bit more authority/recognition. It would be a massive understatement to say that cold water was poured on the scheme – simply a resounding 'NO' with the words 'insurance', 'liability' and 'litigation' to the fore. It felt somewhat dispiriting in the scheme of things that a hundred years ago the golden age of Heroic Arctic exploration was in full swing, yet now we had progressed to this state of affairs. However, nothing had really been organised, so the idea was shelved for the time being without too much grief. Ironically though, on our chosen date of travel, the weather was absolutely horrific. Even a slow traverse of the Rannoch Moor section alone would have been a Titanic struggle of a journey. We'd never even have started and didn't need the Authorities' wisdom to tell us it would have been crazy to attempt it on that particular day.

Fast forward to late summer 2009. Myself and 'A.N. Other' runner were having one of those typical conversations along the lines of "What's your next race / what are your plans?". I had nothing earmarked beyond the Pentland Skyline race. He too had nothing beyond October – there was a long gap in our respective diaries; the midwinter WHW idea was resurrected. The first thing agreed was that it would be totally hush-hush and below the radar – no question of it being in any way 'official' or open for others to come on board. The second was the date – what, exactly, qualified as 'midwinter' as opposed to just 'winter'? Mid-February may be winter but there's several more hours of daylight than in mid December, so its kind of different. Was the actual shortest day the only one to qualify? The Bob Graham Club website

<http://www.bobgrahamclub.org.uk/index.php?page=winter> gave us what seemed to be sensible and authoritative guidance:

“Winter rounds were discussed most recently by the BG Club committee at its meeting in May 2008. It seems appropriate to produce some guidance on what the Club accepts as a winter round. One of the main functions of the Club is to monitor and record attempts, so it is right that it should do its best to set out the parameters of that record-keeping.

The Club perceives that there are 2 distinct types of winter Bob Graham Round which are:

- the "Mid-winter" round which, taking its inspiration from the earliest attempts on a winter round by Pete Simpson and Martin Stone in the early 1980s, is attempted at any time from the weekend before the shortest day through to the first period of decent weather after the shortest day but to be completed no later than 10 January; and
- the "Winter" round, which is a round not falling within the definition set out above, attempted during the period starting on 1 December and finishing on 1 March.

Even this distinction is artificial, because conditions on the shortest day could be quite benign, whilst full winter conditions could well be experienced at any time before or after within the wider definition of "winter". Ultimately, though, if records are to be kept, someone has to set parameters to keep them by. The Club is persuaded by the view of the early winter pioneers that the challenge represented by maximum hours of darkness puts the "Mid-winter" round into a category of its own.”

In order to qualify for mid-winter status, Saturday 19 December would be our date, whilst our target time was sub 24 hours; and, to be a bit more prescriptive, within the one calendar day. South to north being the preferred route. So..... start at 00:00 hrs, the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup>, and finish by 23:59 hrs the same day. There was to be a new moon a couple of nights beforehand, so even a clear sky wouldn't give much moonlight. Not helpful. Daylight/torch-free would be approx 08:00 hrs – 16:00 hrs, give or take a little either side depending on cloud cover/grey overcast. So we calculated we'd be in darkness until about Beinglas Farm (ca. 40 miles), then daylight until around the Devil's Staircase (ca. 76 miles), then darkness through to the finish at Fort William (95 miles).

Getting a support team together could be a major challenge. Being the weekend before Christmas many folk might be away, or have conflicting priorities – shopping with the family, and suchlike activities. We were keen that the support crew in the latter stages should be alert and not themselves suffering from having been many hours on-the-go; plus it seemed a bit much to ask the same people to commit themselves right through from ca. 22:00 hrs on the 18<sup>th</sup> (leave Edinburgh) through to possibly 03:00 hrs on the 20<sup>th</sup> (arrive back in Edinburgh).

Without divulging any details about the adventure, apart from the date/timing, I started asking around Carnethy Hill Running Club folk who, I thought, might be interested in such an adventure. Ideally they would know the WHW route themselves, and have experience of very long runs – so they'd be in a position to provide informed and knowledgeable assistance. We really wanted 6 people (3x2). Amazingly, and fortuitously, 6 responded in the affirmative almost immediately. Keen to help! Without knowing what they were letting themselves in for!! We also had another couple as possible reserves/standbys.

## **THE TEAM**

**A.N. Other's** identity was now divulged to our 6 support crew: **Jez Bragg** doesn't need much introduction to those familiar with long distance running. Current holder of the WHW race record, he'd won gold medal in the recent 100km race at the Commonwealth Championships based around Keswick, and finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in the USA's most prestigious 100 miler (Western States (WS100)) in the summer.

**Myself.** I've been on the podium several times during the past decade following various very long races, but my trophy cabinet is of bird table (small) sized dimensions by comparison. Sadly, my one and only running record (MV50 held for a few years at the Manor Water Sheepdog Trials Hill Race) was recently (and somewhat comprehensively) consigned to the history books.

The support crews – 3 teams of 2. **Olly Stephenson** and **Jamie Thin** would transport us to the start, and provide support to Rowardennan (27 miles). They would then head home. Team 2 – **Russell Stout** and **Lucy Colquhoun** – would provide support from Beinglas Farm (40 miles) across to the Glencoe Ski Road (70 miles). Team 3 – **Alun Morton-Lloyd** and **Andy Millard** – from the Ski Road to Fort William, plus transporting us home to Edinburgh. All these supporters had either completed the WHW race themselves or given support on it, and between them had completed many 'long gruelling challenges' around the world. Jez and I could not have had a better qualified group of people to back us up – we mustn't let them down!

## **TRAINING**

From his various performances through the year Jez was super-fit and just really needed to keep ticking over. We'd always said that we weren't out to bust a gut to do it as fast as possible. We didn't want to hang around wasting time unnecessarily but weren't too fussed about shaving a couple of minutes off here or there. It wasn't a race, it wasn't 'organised' – just, hopefully, a long enjoyable day out. It was pretty obvious to everyone, not least myself, that we'd be going at Murdo-pace, rather than Jez-pace – and I'd made him well aware of it. My own training was all going to plan. At my first Pentland Skyline race since 2004, and 5<sup>th</sup> appearance overall, I clocked a PB and really felt on a roll. But it did seem strange to be ramping up the mileage/training during September / October when most folk were in more of a winding down/end of season mode.

Then, at the end of October, potential disaster struck me. Injury. Six weeks of no running was the experts perceived wisdom. I cross-trained like crazy and dutifully followed my rehab regime to the letter. This was all very well but with 6 weeks off that would leave only 2 weeks until the big run, which should have been spent tapering down/fine tuning. There was a dilemma. I had to balance the recovery from injury with getting some reasonable mileage in with getting a bit of a taper in. I started running somewhat tentatively after 4 weeks with the aim of building up gradually for three weeks then effectively cut right back for the final week. Jez was kept fully informed. Progress was 'okay' until, ten days before the big day, 'ping' – the injury reminded me that it was still very much lurking in the background. Whilst it wasn't serious I knew it was definitely the signal for me to pull out of the run. Part of me was gutted, part of me was more philosophical. It would have been foolhardy to embark on a venture of this scale in this state; a big chance of coming a big cropper.

The whole enterprise was at stake ~ weeks of planning, preparation, and everything lined up. The choice seemed to be either to call the whole thing off, or for Jez to run it on his own. Understandably he wasn't enthusiastic about either option. I was feeling a real spare part, surplus to any requirements. Then Jo (my wife) had a brainwave – why don't I just swap roles with Lucy? Lucy do the run in my place, and I be in Team 2 support alongside Russell. I should just say here that Lucy is a real class-act runner, being the Ladies record holder in the WHW race; and this year having won the 52 mile Glasgow to Edinburgh canal race outright/overall. Jez texted Lucy along the lines of "Errr, Lucy, Murdo's crocked and had to pull out. I'll phone you....." She, being clever, immediately put 2 and 2 together, and knew what was coming. Famously, and most fortuitously, she agreed – despite getting only ten days notice and having done no specific training. A very noble gesture. She did emphasise that she wasn't necessarily committing to the whole distance; just to set off, play it by ear, and see how things progressed. The show was still on! Opinion was expressed that a Jez / Lucy combination would be somewhat quicker than Jez / Murdo. I had to agree, but declined to comment.....

## **THE WEATHER**

The weather was going to make or break the whole enterprise. We were glued to weather forecasts, wwvs, and regular updates from Pete D. based in Kinlochleven. The forecast for the 19<sup>th</sup> looked like being very cold – below freezing throughout – but with little wind. However, a heavy snow shower would be coming down from the north, hitting Tyndrum and Jez / Lucy about 12 noon, and lasting a couple of hours before they emerged out of it. The forecast for the following day (our Plan B: delay the entire timetable by exactly 24 hours) was dire. Go for it; stick with Plan A; green light signals given to all three support teams.

## **THE RUN**

Ollly and Jamie left Edinburgh with the two runners, plus a mountain of kit, soon after 22:00hrs. I then went to bed! No news received, I reckoned all was going to plan. Then, just as Russell and I were packing up the car to head off for Beinglas shortly before 06:00 hrs, a text came through from Jez: "Lucy's decided to call it a day. I'm going on!" Some rapid thinking / plan changing. We'd got all Lucy's kit with us, but she would now be returning to Edinburgh with Ollly & Jamie. A hasty re-shuffle of the car's contents, and off we go – keen to get to Beinglas for the designated 08:00hrs. We do so. Just. Meanwhile I had checked all was okay with Lucy. Thankfully, yes. It was now nearly half-light. A tiny wren-sized robin was hovering expectantly around our feet, this car park no doubt a good source of snacks for hungry robins. He gratefully accepted a small piece of emergency flapjack supposedly reserved for Jez.

The part of the WHW along the north-eastern shore of Loch Lomondside leading up to Beinglas can be treacherous, slippery, and convoluted enough in daylight with many a person running out of steam / enthusiasm hereabouts during the race in midsummer. Jez was now on his own, in darkness, in sub-zero temperature, negotiating jumbled ice-covered rocks and tree roots. I headed down to meet him, and continued and continued – somewhat further than expected. I was glad to see him, I must say! He'd been moving gingerly and was only now able to open up the throttle a bit, having stopped to add some comments to the "Dario Book".

By way of explanation, the Dario Book is a visitors book to the memory of Dario Melaragni, secreted near Doune Bothy. Dario, a wee man in stature, but a colossus in spirit, had been the mainstay of the WHW race organisation for the past ten years. At 46 years he had tragically and suddenly died back in the summertime. This stretch of the route was one of his favourites, the book being a small gesture, one of many from folk who held him in the highest regard.

While Jez receded at speed into the distance, I tried repeatedly to phone through his catering requirements (porridge, tea, lots of it) to Russell. To no avail, no signal. But everything was set up and ready to roll. Broad daylight now as I arrived, Jez tucking in; no wind, still a bit below freezing. We were all fired up. Jez bounded off, keen to make up for lost time on the rough section. The trick for Russell and I was now to head northwards pronto straightaway to be sure all was to hand and ready for Jez's arrival. Made sure he was kept warm, fed and watered promptly but not over hastily.

Everything was going to plan. Alun and Andy (bless them!) hooked up early – at Tyndrum – just as the forecast driving snow arrived. Alun got some great 'action-man' photos as Jez sped up the hill into a swirling whiteness. Although he was on his own, we now had 2 support vehicles and four of us in attendance. Bridge of Orchy quickly passed. By Victoria Bridge the snow had moved on; Jez paused for a photo opportunity with deer crossing the ice-covered river as a background. A very still, quiet, and wintry scene. He's totally focussed on the task in hand – distance to go/timing/splits/likely hour of finishing. He and Russell set off across Rannoch Moor – energetic springs in their steps. Very hard to believe Jez had already covered over 60 miles.

Over in Glencoe, it is colder, there's about an hour of daylight left. A message comes through from Russell – "porridge, tea, lots of it, for both of us". They bound in, pink-cheeked and totally hyped up. Russell departs homewards; no tarrying for Jez – get to Altnafeadh, the bottom of the Devil's Staircase, before using a torch. The reflected whiteness of the snow helps, as daylight fades. A stunning sunset to the southwest.

Alun joins him for the Devil's Staircase climb over to Kinlochleven. This is a bit of an unknown. Will the north side descent from the top of the D.S. be one great sheet of ice? Pretty likely. In darkness, Andy and I drive round to Kinlochleven. It's cold. It's empty, the main road as slippery as a snake in places. Not inspiring. Jez and Alun trot in, not quite so briskly now. Jez's mouth is drooping a bit at the edges, but the descent down the north slope had been a charge through deep snow. Not ice. That was fortunate. "Something for you to ponder now, young man", I say. "Are we going to finish at the official WHW route end (by the roundabout where the Glen Nevis Road joins the main A82); or on another 500 yards to the Leisure Centre, where the WHW race ends?" "Funny you should ask – I've just been thinking about that myself. I reckon we've got to go for the Leisure Centre. Don't want anyone accusing us of not doing the whole thing!" Great, we're all agreed on this.

Jez departs, not quite so nimbly; the temperature is dropping; the colder air makes breathing harder. We three drive round to Lundavra, a single track winding 8 miles dead-end to the middle of nowhere. There is much ice on the road and evidence that the handful of vehicles using it have slipslided in many places. We get to within ca. 200 yards of the designated meeting place, too risky to take the car further.

Andy sets off back to meet Jez. The temperature has now dropped to minus 5°C, the lowest yet. A star-gazers paradise above. No sign at all of life apart from lonely Lundavra farmhouse's single light in the middle distance. No sign of any footprints on the snow covered tracks. 7 miles left. Relief as we see two torchlights appearing. There had been a lot of ice over this last section; several tumbles; morale rather battered. The briefest of stops, just get it over now. Andy continues with Jez. Alun and I by car – even more slip-slidy now – to the Fort William Leisure Centre. We pause there for a bit – marvelling at Jez's fluidity of movement, his running style, and his mental fortitude. We trot down back the way to meet them emerging on to the tarmac from the Braveheart car park. One mile to go. 7 minutes is all it takes. There's no reception party, just the three of us to witness Jez touch the Leisure Centre door and stop his watch. 21 hours, 14 minutes. A few photos, a quick change of clothing, down the road to the chippie, then the long slow (it is now snowing heavily again) drive back to Edinburgh while we start texting the news and going public about the event for the first time. A remarkable achievement! Mission accomplished!!

## **EPILOGUE**

Over the years nearly 500 people have completed the WHW race in midsummer in 'race conditions', with more than 20 / 24 hours of daylight, ranging in time from Jez's record 15:44 to nearly 35:00. This 21:14 is well inside the top 20% of all these finishers. I believe he's now the first person to complete it solo (supported) in midwinter, as well as being well under our target 24 hours, and well within the one calendar day. Can his time be lowered? Probably. Could it be done in sub 20 hours? Maybe. Time will no doubt tell.

A huge amount of planning, preparation and back-up went into this exercise – vital, in my opinion if one is to attempt it at this time of year. To some extent we may have been lucky. Two days later the temperature at Tyndrum dropped to -12°C; ten days later, again at Tyndrum, it was -15°C. As I conclude this write-up it is now two weeks after the run. Much of the country has been covered in snow and ice throughout the past fortnight ~ the "worst" ("best?") winter for 15 years, "they" say. The whole thing may not have got off the ground at all; it may well have stopped mid-way. We 'carpe'ed the diem' and went for it – and it worked. A pleasure, and a privilege for me to be part of it. Likewise, I hope, for all the others involved. Without them, and their unstinting assistance, it would just have been an unfulfilled daydream.

Now..... what's next on the agenda???

**MURDO McEWAN**

**Photographs by Alun Morton-Lloyd (AML); Olly Stephenson (OS); Murdo McEwan (MM)**