

## Morrone Hill Race, Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> September 2010

I ventured deep into the heart of the Cairngorms on Saturday to visit the Braemar Gathering to take part in the Morrone Hill Race. This 3.5 mile race makes up one of the various highland games at the gathering and takes in just over 1,000ft of ascent. The 195 year old event even gets a visit from the main players of the royal family each year as they apparently have a lovely little holiday cottage just down the road in Balmoral.

Before the race leaves the sports ground you get to do a lap of the running track. My plan of running on the inside lane didn't really pay off as there was a quite a bit of tussling for position with everyone's adrenalin getting the better of them as they sprinted round as fast as they could for the benefit of the crowd.



Once out of the ground, the race follows the path almost to the summit of Morrone which looms ominously behind the stands. Spectators with binoculars are able to watch the entire race from their seats.

During a brief recce I'd seen quite a few people planning their short cuts up small crags and through the heather to the summit. I stuck to my guns though, having now learned from experience that, on the way up at least, the path is far more sympathetic to my running/slow plodding technique.

It seemed like I'd only just set off before the flare was let off signalling to the spectators below that someone had reached half way. I held my own for most of the ascent before losing a bit of ground close to the summit. I eventually collected my primitive Sportident tag (an elastic band with a bit of paper stapled to it) at the top and

dived straight off through the heather, heading directly for the showground far beneath. It was good to see some of my fell running experience starting to pay off as I made up a few places bouncing down through the heather.



A slight navigational error (the one where you just follow the person in front instead of the route you double checked less than an hour before) meant I ended up trudging through a strength sapping boggy bit before reaching the sports ground again. The legs and lungs felt exhausted at this point but this evaporated when entering the show ground for a final lap of the track.



Every one of the several thousand spectators cheers you on as you run past them – a great feeling. I'm sure I managed to sprint the entire lap as a result of the boost this gave me (although home video footage suggests otherwise). I managed to cross the line in 31<sup>st</sup> place.

The next couple of minutes were pretty surreal, as I sat on the grass in the sun trying to catch my breath. The crowd were still cheering, there was a troop of highland dancers strutting their stuff on a stage next to me and I was desperately trying to get a good look inside the royal box to try and spot Liz and her family (whilst trying not to look like I was actually looking). Unfortunately they didn't turn up till later on in the day meaning that they didn't get to use the 'Go Chris Go!' banner I'd prepared for them to wave.

The other events during the day were excellent to watch after the race, especially tossing the caber and the Scottish Pipe Band as they marched past the Queen in her Hansel and Gretel-esque viewing shed whilst playing 'Scotland the Brave'. This actually brought a lump to my throat and I'm just a Sassenach!





If I'm still racing in 30 years I'm sure this race will still be one of the highlights of my illustrious fell running career. I can't really recommend it enough!

Chris Winter

Photos: Katherine Winter