

West Highland Way Race 2010

Or 'Shut up and Eat this'

The difference was amazing. Field blister surgery and a change into road shoes had done the trick! I was a new woman and it felt great. 72 miles in, 23 to go, the Glencoe Ski Centre almost felt like the start of the race. Ok, slight exaggeration, but I had a feeling that good things were about to happen, following what had been a couple of slower sections in the middle, though none of it remotely disastrous. The day had been superb in every way and I could not have wished for more from this race. The weather was the best that the West Highlands can produce, the organisation of the race, support from everyone but most of all my special super support team was second to none, and I just had fun all day. My colleagues at work don't seem to quite get that.....

The weekend really started early Friday afternoon, we drove over to Milngavie and checked into the Premier Inn so that I could get a few hours rest before the start. Lewis went to tour Milngavie to give me peace and quiet but I didn't really sleep, though I did manage about 6 hours of horizontal rest before getting up and going to register. Just before I left, the other half of my support team, Joe Faulkner, had arrived, having first gone to the wrong room in the wrong premier inn! Joe is a navigator extraordinaire under normal circumstances, but maybe the outskirts of Glasgow just aren't his thing! I left the team to get their rest before getting up at 3.15am to get to our first arranged meeting point, 19 miles in, at Balmaha.

Registration was efficient and friendly, my only problem being that I had no idea what to do with my 'Goody Bag', this clearly was not a fell race. Luckily I bumped into Lisa, Matt Davis's wife, a friend who works with Lewis. Lisa 'adopted' me, along with Matt's other supporter, Andy, and Matt then also appeared soon afterwards. We whiled away the hour until the race briefing, and it became quite cold. Briefing was short and informative as all good briefings should be – and then it was another half hour to wait until we could get going. But finally the moment came – a lovely touch was a moment's applause for people we care about who are no longer with us, a moment of reflection.

1am and that was it. It felt great to be running, I love running at night in your own little world with a headtorch and whilst initially everyone was closely grouped, people spread out fairly quickly and could get into their own pace. Jogging along was fun, I felt strong, not the sluggish feeling that I quite often have being so full of food at the beginning of a race. I talked to quite a few people, but remember specifically Dave Troman, who I ran alongside for a while, from Keswick. We were both fellrunners who have recently delved into the world of ultra trail running, and were jointly fascinated by the event. Both talking about sub 24 at that stage, for me that was a truly best case scenario and if everything went great, for Dave I think it was secretly his worst case scenario! Watch out John Kynaston, someone here who can more than match your detail for splits and pacing! Thanks Dave, great to run with you – and well done on your 20hr20 finish – excellent run.

On through Drymen – a surprising amount of supporters here for the time of night. I ran through encouraged by the amount of people who seem to want to be out at 3am watching slightly mad runners, many of whom would still be doing it 24 hours later. After turning off the road and heading up toward the forest which leads to Conic Hill, I caught up with Tim Downie, who I remembered from I think the first Highland Fling I did in 2008. Great to chat and pass the time in the forest, notable memory is Tim's personal training hill (and of course, the much documented sprint finish when he passed me at the end). I also had the pleasure of walking up the hill out of Tyndrum with him later on in the race, in the middle of the day.

It had been a wonderful night, no wind, a chill but not too cold, in fact, perfect running weather. It was not dark for very long at all, and by 3.30am headtorches were off. Conic hill was great – almost a proper hill at last and a real descent to look forward too. Nearing the top of the climb, and as it levelled off slightly, but the trend still being uphill, I was beginning to jog again and tripped up somehow, landing flat

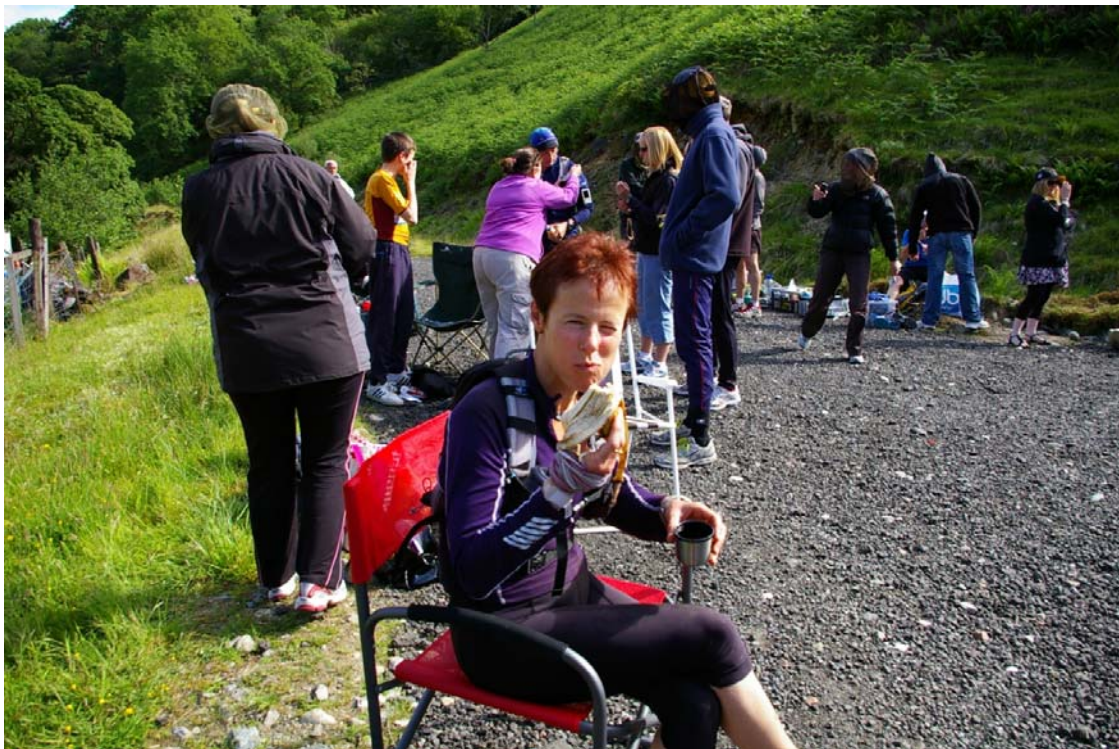
on my front and as I got up I was covered in the dust of our dry summer! No idea what happened, a few guys came passed me and checked I was ok, which was great of them. No damage, luckily I still had my gloves on as it had been a little cold, so I think my hands were protected. Trotted on downhill to try and get the time back, but was happy with how I was going (just a little up on my Fling times).

At about 4.30am, I walked through Balmaha carpark, feeling a bit like the queen! Joe and Lewis immediately took up their stations, one on each side of me – one removed my bottle from its holder and refilled it, putting it back. The other removed my rubbish and stuffed another couple of bars in my 'extra bar' holder, even my buff was removed and brushed down after my fall and replaced on my wrist! I was done and literally dusted in seconds. I was feeling fine, and just kept walking, knowing that the next section would prove tough, partly as it always does, and partly because it's a sunrise/early morning thing. However, I knew I had to push on and did just that. Up the first short climb, I ate my sandwich as I knew there was not much uphill coming up for big eats. A very cheery marshall was on the summit, actually singing 'oh what a beautiful morning!' which was above and beyond the call of duty for that time in the morning, but nonetheless very motivating! The rest of the section went by, as the light over the loch took on a beautiful early morning hue and the calmness of the water offering amazing reflections. Lewis and Joe were next to be seen at Rowardenen – lots of people seemed to be meeting support crews along the road at several points, but I did not see that as necessary, and really only a waste of minutes.

As I came into Rowardenen, I was tired and found Lewis and Joe who sat me in the chair (wonderful) and fed me coffee and spaghetti hoops as ordered. All went down well, and I felt better for a sit down but I think I was suffering from that well known phenomenon named by Joe as 'early morning effect'. Still chattering away though and kept being told to 'shut up and eat', not the first time I would hear that in the day! Eventually I got up from my comfy chair and decided it was time to carry on. I was looking forward to really attacking the next sections to Inversnaid and Beinglas, the only way is to focus like mad and just get them out of the way. I ran most of the way to Beinglas on my own, it's amazing how people spread out so quickly. My secret weapon – the ipod was in my drop bag at Inversnaid, so I was looking forward to that – aim being to take my mind off the section of tree roots! At Inversnaid, it was now 8am and beginning to warm up slightly. The marshalls were, as ever, cheery and helpful, and my drop bag located quickly and efficiently. I changed over my bits and pieces and my bottle was refilled, I kept walking whilst sorting myself out. I really enjoyed this bit, still running quite a lot on my own, but now had my tunes and felt like things were going well. Lovely to see team at Beinglas, unusually for me I did not really know what I wanted to eat here, but had just eaten a sandwich on the run before getting there, so a banana and some coke seemed to be about right.



Joe attempting to keep the midges at bay at Beinglas!



Eating as usual!

I was slightly ahead of my very broad schedule, still feeling fine and well aware that the odd few minutes either way mean nothing in these events. I did, however, consciously decide to slow down a bit on next section and aimed to be at Auchertyre in 2hrs and 15 from leaving Bein Glas, which would allow me to regroup a bit. Interestingly this was almost the exact time it took me, and it did feel really slow. In the Fling I had tried really hard on this last part to Tyndrum, felt I was going really well, and still was around the same time it took me in this race. This time, I walked a lot – all the inclines, most of the cow track (luckily not a cow in sight) and jogged what I could from the gate into the forest. Still eating and drinking fine – felt fairly strong in a 50 mile kind of way. As I approached Auchertyre, another lady was in front of me and was running, yes, running, so I thought I'd better run too, it was only after looking at the photographs afterwards that I realised how uphill that field was.



This is uphill!

Joe and Lewis were at the gate and opened it for me, guiding me then to the 'weigh-in'. I found it mildly amusing to be publicly weighed, and, knowing that I was likely to have put on quite a bit, because I always

eat so much, I was ready with my defence. However, none of that was necessary as I seemed to be about the same as at the beginning, despite eating like there was no tomorrow.



Captions please!

We moved to the car and famous red chair, and I changed here into my vest and sunhat, started a sandwich and had some more coffee. Bottles refilled and bars stocked and I set off again still sandwich munching. Although that sounds quick and efficient, my stop here I think was still around 15 minutes including the weigh in. So off I went, munching and jogging, glad of my vest, hat and sunglasses now that the day was really warming up. Made good progress to Tyndrum, and broadly my times (less stoppages) were the same as the Fling (I should perhaps point out here that my Fling was not super fast!).

However, I found the hill out of Tyndrum really hard work, but soon Tim caught me, I think having stopped in Tyndrum, and we walked up together – talking through such things as the UTMB and how Tim was planning to ‘sell’ a walking holiday to his wife, so he could recce the whole thing! Once at the top, though, he was going much more strongly than me, and I sent him off on his way. This was now the hardest part of the route for me – the headwind was strong and I was, for reasons none other than this was the middle of the day and I was having my mid race ‘downer’, not able to push the pace. I tried to jog, but my body was saying an emphatic no, strange because this track was now largely flat and slightly downhill, with very little uphill. I gave in to my body, knowing from experience that this was just a dip, and knowing, perhaps more importantly, that mentally I needed to stay positive and keep focused. So I settled into a march, and just kept putting one foot in front of the other to Bridge of Orchy – which, eventually, appeared on the horizon. I also used the time to make sure that I kept eating small amounts every 30mins or so, and continuing to drink.

I had been up on schedule at Auchertyre and so the minutes ‘lost’ during my slower bit to Bridge of Orchy just put me right back on my planned times. So that was fine, though, if I’m honest, I was a little disappointed to have lost those minutes. Bridge of Orchy was a sunny picnic area, I stretched my thighs (Dave Atkinson style), ate a tin of cold spaghetti hoops and probably drank more coffee. I had a good break to regroup and also we had to wait a few minutes to be 4 hours behind the leader’s time so that I could have a support runner. In a strange sort of way, it was quite encouraging to have to wait for this time. Lewis and I had talked through the ‘support runner strategy’ before the race and we’d decided that it would be best for me for him not to run with me on the very last section, leaving that dubious privilege

to Joe. Greater and very similar light is shed on this philosophy if you read Vicky Hart's race report, the last section from Kinlochleven for her, would have been very similar for me if I had had Lewis with me!

So it was that Lewis set off with me from Bridge of Orchy for the penultimate section instead. I really enjoyed the hill and felt I was going fine, but Lewis, though I knew he was tempering his pace enormously, seemed like a race horse just emerging from the gates – of course – he did not already have 60 miles in his legs. So I settled into my usual position about 30metres behind him, and kept plodding on! It was lovely to have some company, and whilst I had not regained my pace from the beginning of the race I was going ok, and really enjoying the light and beautiful day on Rannoch Moor – how lucky we had been with the weather. My feet were beginning to hurt – ever since I started doing long trail races, and no matter which shoes I wear, I always get blisters on the inside of my heels. I had protective compeeds and tape all over my feet, but could just feel that the blisters were developing. On the Cateran, I had the same thing and they popped with an instant's pain and then I did not feel another thing, so here I was hoping that the same thing would happen. I also think the heat did not help. They were slowing me down enough to decide that surgery was needed at the Ski Centre, I always believe that the best policy is to burst them and then slap another compeed over them. Lewis ran ahead to tell Joe that the next job in the broad task base of a support crew was to become surgeons and the required material appeared. I was sat down, Joe and Lewis took a foot each simultaneously and did the necessary. It was great, only a little painful, and we were careful to make sure that the new compeeds were applied very carefully so that they would not move. I continued to eat my sandwich whilst all this was going on, and drinking coke, to the amusement of some of the onlookers. That was a 20minute stop, but definitely worth it to sort feet out – I made it all up and more.

On leaving the Ski Centre, I felt great. A good long sit down and food and drink, not to mention new feet, had done me a lot of good. It was now 6pm, I was still right on schedule and so had not lost any time since Bridge of Orchy, despite my long stop at Glencoe. We ran along to the Kingshouse, and from there, on the path, which is always a touch too close to the big main road for my liking. We caught up and overtook a few parties and I was actively beginning to dream of the hill that is the Devil's staircase. So far there simply had not been enough hill in this race! Joe had stopped at the foot of the hill to cheer us on, Lewis ran to the car to get the camera, and we got some fab photos of the next section.



Off we went, feeling strong and storming up that hill. It was so lovely that we stopped on the summit for a few more photos and to admire the most amazing views of Rannoch Moor and the Mamores. On the

way down, my legs continued to feel super, I stretched out and really ran (well, all relative, but it felt like it). Getting excited now about 24 hours being a real possibility if I kept going this strongly. Strode on and down to Kinlochleven, checked into the control, and once again underwent the public weigh-in – all seemed to be the same.



Starting the long descent to Kinlochleven

Think I had a banana and some more coke and just a quick stop as I felt fine, and both me and the team were keen to get me on my way. Munched my last sandwich as I went up the hill out of the village, now with Joe doing his ever awesome support job at the side of me. The evening light was even more beautiful and the sun was going down. We got to the top of the fantastic climb to be greeted with yet more flat track running, but I just kept my head down and used the time to catch up on life with Joe who I had not seen for ages – he was telling me all about his preparation for the TERREX adventure race at the end of August, and the organisation of the heb challenge. So the time passed and gradually we covered the miles to the control at Lundavra. Here the atmosphere was lovely, a big bonfire going and everyone cheering us on. Didn't stop, hadn't planned to and didn't need to so just pushed on. I was still eating loads and on a very regular basis over this section – I was, in fact, hungry!



The track towards Lundavra

There was something special about those last few miles, it was now around 11pm and was still light enough to run without a torch until we were in the depths of the forest. As we emerged onto the big forest road and steep downhill, I knew it was going to finally kill off my quads, but it did not seem to matter then, so I went for it. As the forest road levelled out, I had underestimated the length of the flat bit to the carpark and the final section on road to the finish. It seemed to go on for ever, I was hungry and still shovelling in jelly babies, and then Lewis was there waiting for us at the car park, and ready to escape the midges and run in with us. I knew now there was not much left, and was giving my all, but not really covering the ground as I would like. I was overtaken on the road by Tim, (who did apologise afterwards, but hey, it's a race) and finally the lights of Fort William and the Leisure centre came into view. Negotiating the cars in the car park was a final obstacle, but got to the doors and that was it – we'd finished. A super day, and I was delighted with my time of 23hrs 7minutes.



Just about there!



A final weigh-in – then to sleep!

The following day there was a lovely prizegiving ceremony – so, following breakfast in Morrisons (we know how to live it up – and not the only people to have that idea!) we went along. Every finisher was presented with a West Highland Way goblet – a fitting close to a superb weekend.

Thanks to all the organisers, marshalls, and well done to all the runners. Finally, massive thanks to Joe and Lewis, who were the best support team I could have wished for.

Jane Grundy