

Ian Beattie

West Highland Way Race, 18 June 2005

It's 6pm, Friday 17 June 2005. I've been lying in my bed since 10.30am, but have managed no more than 2 hours sleep. For the last 2 and a half hours I've just been lying here: too hot, stomach in knots, hearing every noise outside. I give up and decide to get up. I feel ok, but it hasn't gone to plan and I'm feeling worried. When I dropped out of the 1998 race one of the main problems was tiredness – I don't want the same thing to happen this year, not with the cameras following me. I phone George – he calms me down a bit, but the worry is still there.

We plan to leave for Milngavie around 10.45pm, but the evening drags by. We have dinner at 8pm, a huge portion of pasta and chicken, but I feel a bit sick – definitely pre race nerves. Alison gets ready about 9.30pm and we pack the car – it helps the time pass. Sam is evicted from the Big Brother house. Finally everything is ready, we say goodbye to David, and head to Milngavie Station. We arrive about 11.30pm and as usual it's an incredible sight – you can feel the tension in the air from the minute you arrive. I meet up with George and Bobby, register, go to the toilet, meet the film guys, say hello to Ellen (she looks nervous too), go to the toilet again, meet Brent (he's felling tired as well – I'm glad it isn't just me), and go to the toilet again. At 12.45am Dario does the pre race briefing and it's time to go. Bobby loves the briefing – it's his favourite part of the night. He says that everyone looks absolutely terrified.

I feel more relaxed as I line up near the front, with Brent and Adrian. There's a camera in my face but I'll get used to that over the next 24 hours. At exactly 1.00am Dario says 'Go' and we're off. At last. My plan is to stay near the front so I don't get held up in the traffic going through the gates on the old railway line to the Beech Tree Inn. It seems to work. I run for a while with Paddy Jumelle, Allan Douglas, Tony Thistlewaite and Debbie Cox – all good runners, all nervous about what lies ahead. It's very hot, I'm drinking loads of water, but I feel good.

Before I know it I'm coming up the hill to Drymen and meet Alison, George and Bobby – 1 hour 59 minutes, a bit fast but nothing to worry about. I have a quick coffee and head towards Balmaha. I'm surprised by how quiet it is – normally at this stage there are lots of runners about, but the only person I can see is Bobby Keogh, who is having a few problems following the route. I pass him before Conic Hill. This area used to be a forest, but it is now just a wasteland – it's a shame, although without the trees there is the most incredible view over Loch Lomond. It's just before 4.00am and day is breaking. Going up Conic Hill I feel tired, but I have to concentrate hard going down the other side and feel a lot better. I don't want to fall when I'm being filmed. George appears about 400m from the checkpoint – he's worried I'm going too fast but I'm ok – I've reached Balmaha in 3 hours 27 minutes, pretty much on target.

A quick stop, something to eat, a toilet stop and I'm on my way. I'm feeling good. The next section is tough but I'm going well. I pass Jodie Young – I'm surprised to see him so far up the field. I get to Rowardennan in 5 hours 5 minutes and have some soup and pasta – it'll be a long time till I see the back-up team again at Beinglas Farm, so I want something substantial to eat. I leave feeling good, but the next section is terrible. I keep feeling my eyes closing on the long uphill track. I'm feeling very low. It's too early to be tired. My lack of sleep has caught up with me. I'll never finish if I feel this bad now. Adrian Stott passes me. I'm struggling badly. The track gets narrower but I don't feel any better. I'm struggling.

After another 20 minutes of this hell a miracle happens. I see the concrete block on the path that means I am only half a mile from the hotel. Already? I wasn't expecting that. It gives me a huge lift. Before I know it I'm at Inversnaid and the Search and Rescue team is encouraging me. I don't want a banana but I drink 500ml of flat coke and feel a lot better. They tell me I can do it. The next section is tough, probably the hardest on the whole course, but I just work through it. I'm determined again. I'm going to finish this race. I'm not going to give up. I can't give up. It would look terrible in the film. It's a slog up to Beinglas Farm but I make it. George meets me about a mile out. I think he's surprised how bad I look and how emotional I am but he doesn't tell me – he just tells me that I'm doing well. He's lying but it doesn't matter. It's what I need to hear. George, Alison and Bobby do a fantastic job for me. I'm in tears, I'm shouting – I must sound like a rambling idiot. I'm still emotional when I arrive at Beinglas Farm (8 hours 29 mins) but a 10 minutes top and some soup calms me down a bit. I set off slowly.

I pass through Derrydarroch checkpoint – Murdo and Jo tell me I'm in 19th position. I thought I was a bit further up the field, but at this stage it doesn't really matter. I feel cramp coming on, probably because it is so warm, and I have to walk a section I would normally run. That costs me time. I'll see Alison and George soon – we meet up beside the A82 and I get some more drink and a Muller rice. I don't feel as good as other years but at least I'm feeling better than Jason, our cameraman. He's suffering from hay fever and has fallen asleep in the car. It's bliss – a stop without a camera in my face! Muriel (Tim's wife) is there and she reckons Tim is about an hour behind me. An hour is ok but I'll need to keep working – I don't want him to pass me. I wonder how far Brent is behind – I don't want him to catch me either. I head up the hill – near Crianlarich I pass Eryk Grant who is really struggling. He's on a downer. Before too long I'm crossing the A82 again, Jason is back on his feet and filming.

Cramp strikes again on the next section and it slows me down quite a bit. I'm glad to get to Tyndrum (11 hours 35 mins). Bill Gault and Allan Gall from Central are there. It's great to see them and it gives me a real lift. I'm even able to have a bit of a laugh with Dario. I change my socks with some difficulty and see that my feet are in a terrible state. Jason films them.

At normal times they aren't my best feature. Today they are hideous. Although I'm tired I'm feeling positive. I walk up the long hill out of Tyndrum – I need to let my food digest - then run strongly to Bridge of Orchy. I pass a few people driving electric cars along the track – am I hallucinating?- and meet George at Bridge of Orchy station. Feeling really good now, so just a quick stop and I'm off. Unfortunately my stomach rejects the coffee – my wrenching must be heard for miles and miles. My quads are screaming as I come down the steep hill to the Inverornan Hotel, but Gordon meets me at just before Victoria Lodge and is able to sprint away from me, much to his delight. Maybe he'll do this race when he's older?

I'm not looking forward to Rannoch Moor – I'm tired, the path will be rough and the walkers will annoy me. It is and they do. They don't get out of my way until it's almost too late. They are on their mobile phones. Why? Can't they just switch them off for a day? They all have walking poles. Why? They're a waste of time on this surface. I have an energy drink at Ba Bridge and make my way slowly to Kingshouse. Eryk Grant passes me coming down the hill. He's like a new man – he's going like a train, and I'm struggling. Somehow I feel better near the bottom of the hill and almost feel good as I get into Kingshouse (16 hours 18 minutes). George runs with me from this point – he goes in front and says 'thanks' when the walkers tell us we're doing well. He doesn't tell them he has only been running from Kingshouse. Why should he? He's more polite to the walkers than I am. I just grunt.

We have a quick word with Alex Drain, Tim's back-up runner. He asks me how I'm feeling – I tell him I'm completely knackered. It's true. I find the Devil's Staircase really hard. I'm sure it's never been as tough as this before. Going down the other side isn't much better, but I manage to keep running and arrive in Kinlochleven in 18 hours 48 minutes. A final stop, a goodbye to Alison and Gordon, and I'm off on the last section before 19 hours are on the clock. I know I'll do it in under 24 hours – as long as I don't fall apart I should be under 23.

Even before I'm out of Kinlochleven I'm cold, and I need to stop for the toilet. I should have gone to the toilet in the pub beside the checkpoint. I have a very bad 15 minutes – the sweat is pouring off me as I climb the hill. It must be 20 degrees, even at 8 o'clock at night. Alan is at the top filming and we have a quick chat. I'm positive again and know I'm going to do it. I work hard and George keeps me going. We pass a couple of runners; one of them comes back and passes us. He has 2 support people – they aren't hanging around. Before too long we reach the top of the Lairig Mhor, turn the corner, then soon arrive at Lundavra. I need to do the last bit in under 2 hours to get under 23 - I tell George we could do that in our sleep. Wishful thinking? We head off strongly and pass someone who looks to be really struggling. It is still light enough to run, even in the thick forest, so I don't need the headtorch.

Eventually we climb over the stile and I can see Glen Nevis campsite – it's nearly done. I run strongly down the hill and pass Ben Rooney, who had passed me earlier. I keep running hard – I don't want him to come back again. Someone passed me in the final section in the 2000 race and I don't want it to happen again. I pass by the campsite, then the Braveheart carpark, then reach the main road. I'm strong. I keep running. I tell George to run ahead and make sure Jason is ready to film. At the roundabout a car pulls up alongside me – it's Jason, hanging out the window. He films the last 400m. Fantastic. I'm there. 22 hours 42 minutes; 13th place, a minute faster than last year, although an hour and 3 minutes slower than my 2003 time. Still, I'm pleased. I get my shower – it's a struggle – and I do an interview with Alan. I'm on a real high and we have a bit of a laugh. Can't wait to see how I really look. Alison drives us back to the Travel Inn. She has been up for more than 40 hours and is shattered. George is shattered too. Gordon is fast asleep in the car. I'm euphoric. I've done it.