

Owen Jones

WEST HIGHLAND WAY RACE 2005

Is pain good or bad? Sergeant Rod assures me its good - it means I'm still moving, despite having done 75 miles in 22 hours. We're at the top of the Devil's Staircase, it's getting dark fast and I'm trying to find my spare torch so Sergeant Rod can scout ahead for the easiest path. My legs are in agony, I'm exhausted and can't see how I can get to Kinlochleven, never mind Fort William .

It was all so different 22 hours ago. Certainly, the torches were on, but I was fresh, raring to go, waiting at the entrance to the tunnel as the seconds ticked away on the Milngavie station clock. Maybe if I'd known what lay ahead I wouldn't have been so keen.

It was already warm - uncomfortably so for those of us first timers who were wearing reflective bibs over running gear. With back pack, bum bag with attachments and head torch I resembled a potholer getting ready to descend to the centre of the earth rather a well-honed athlete setting off on a 95-mile jaunt to the North of Scotland.

One o'clock and we're off! Through Milngavie town centre past the surprised late-night revellers then out onto serious running surface - dirt paths, mud and darkness. Torches on, jostling with a few over-excited runners, a bit of nervous banter and then settle down to a steady pace. It turns out my steady pace is too slow for most others, and before long I'm near the back of the pack. Still, I've got my own running plan and I'm sticking to it - 20 minutes run, 20 minutes walk - too fast now and I'll never finish. After half-an-hour I'm running alongside Geoff from Grimsby . He doesn't appear to have a torch! It's getting incredibly warm so I shed a layer and stow it in my backpack. We're joined by another slowcoach and I act as guide for a couple of miles - so inevitably we take a wrong turn (twice) and by the time we reach Dumgoyach there are definitely no others behind us or around us. The only comfort is the occasional flash of headtorches in the distance, suggesting we must be almost in the right direction. We're a bit slow (even for me) so I pick up the pace and leave the other two behind.

Navigating in the dark is definitely NOT my forte - and I get worse when the batteries in my headtorch give up and I can't see where I'm going! (So much for meticulous planning!) Luckily, I meet up with George Douglas from Helensburgh - a kindred spirit who I encounter at various points in the race and with whom I have a number of stimulating discussions - he provides light, new batteries are inserted and off I go again. I've reached the 11K mark and I've already had more unplanned diversions than I'd hoped for in the whole race! Past Beech Tree Inn - are those back-up teams already? - and some uninterrupted running for 30 minutes. I meet George again at Gartness and we jog/walk easily up the hills towards Drymen. We greet the dawn approaching the B858 (3:40a.m.) and then I run ahead. This is George's 3 rd WHW race - 2003 ended at Tyndrum with collapsed knees; 2004 he had to pull out at the foot of the Devil's Staircase with the same problem. This year he's taking no chances, and a fast walk for most of the 95 miles is his plan.

Uneventful progress to and through Garadhban Forest - passing the American, Bobby Keoch, who is feeling rough - and on towards Conic Hill. The view of the Hill comes earlier than expected - through a wasteland of felled trees - but it is beautiful. Out comes my digital camera - a present requested with this race in mind - and the first of many photos is taken. Past a few runners and early-morning walkers and up the Hill - it's steep! Down the Hill is worse - slippery with dew, but what a view of the Loch ! - and I'm trying to make up time. My toes hurt (surely my shoes haven't shrunk?), my driver is waiting at Balmaha and I'm already 60 minutes behind schedule (too much chat!). Of course, the inevitable happens. Trying to keep to dryish patches I miss my footing and fall! What else can go wrong? Still, nothing damaged but pride (luckily no spectators bar the sheep) so "I pick myself up.." etc and sprint on. Another wrong trail, a look at the map, retrace steps, even steeper descent and then a sprint into the Car Park at Balmaha Visitor's Centre. From the look on Billy's face I can tell I'm a bit late and from the lack of cars I can tell I'm not one of the first runners! A quick look at my sore toes reveals long nails - I'd forgotten to trim them! Nail clippers were not one of the items on my list of needs, so they'll have to wait. Still, I'm feeling great, so a short stop for banana and drink replenishment, a change from slacks to shorts and off to Rowardennan.

Loch Lomond is fantastic! Flat as a millpond, the far shore eerily misty, birdsong filling the air - what more could you want at 5:30 on a beautiful morning - perhaps not the prospect of a further 75 miles without a rest, but then that's what I'm here for (that, and the photos). So I take more pictures and jog along the shore, and road and rocks and up hills and down. Rowardennan beckons, with another short break - and probably a ticking-off for being too slow - but meanwhile life is good. Rowardennan at 07:25 - 27 miles in nearly 6 and a half hours; I could've walked it quicker! Still, I'm reasonably fresh after the first marathon, and I never intended to break any records. A short break (no row - Billy's resigned to me being nowhere near my pre-race schedule estimates!) and off again - this time in the company of Lee Davies, a naval officer who did much of his training at sea, running round the decks of Her Majesty's ships. We talked a lot (surprise, surprise), and walked a lot - the terrain was tricky for the next 8 miles to Inversnaid, honestly - I've never seen such a rocky track described as a footpath, some of the boulders were taller than me! And, it was very warm. I also took a number of photos - surprise again - and had one phone call from my brother-in-law so it was perhaps only a small shock when Bobby Keoch came pounding past us and asked if we realised that the deadline for the next checkpoint was only half-an-hour away - and we still had a mile and a half to go! We hadn't, so we ran - and reached Inversnaid with 15 minutes to spare (09:45) - not surprisingly nearly last, but more surprisingly only numbers 73 and 74 - there were already more than a dozen retirals as much due to the humidity as anything else. The deadlines had also been extended due to

the conditions. A welcome banana or two from the Trossachs search and rescue team, some water and off we go again. Lee decided to rest for longer so I was on my own with a mere 60 miles to go!

The next six miles were some of the trickiest yet. Little chance of running and a lot of chances for slipping and falling - so I didn't. I also didn't make up any time. I was now about 2 hours behind my estimates, but I had past 2 or 3 runners, so I wasn't too concerned. More of a concern was a meeting with the search and rescue team looking for a runner in difficulty - they never found him, but he did turn up later at the next checkpoint and continued on to finish. I reached Cnap Mor at the end of Loch Lomond at about 11:30. It was hot and humid, but I was looking forward to a rest and some lunch at Beinglas Farm. I phoned my colleagues in the Haematology lab. at Crosshouse Hospital as I was descending the hill and looked around for a few photo ops. Not looking where I was going, I slipped and went over on my right ankle! Disaster! Luckily no lasting damage, but a salutary lesson - don't mix your pleasures (or hobbies). So, camera away and hobble on to the next stop.

Beinglas Farm and lunch. Great! But, who's this? My support runner - Doctor Rod Pugh, veteran of 2 WHW races in under 24 hours - is there to greet me, 15 miles early. Billy had thought I needed a bit of encouragement so had collected him early from the station at Tyndrum and brought him here. Good, but first some rest. I changed my socks and running vest and sat down to have a sandwich. "What are you doing?" asks Sergeant Rod. "Having my lunch." I replied. "No you're not. Time for that later. You're too slow and we need to make up time. Have you been drinking enough?" "Probably not," I mumbled. "Drink that bottle of water and hurry up. By the way, what took you so long?" "I was talking to a few runners and taking a few photos." "What bit of RACE do you not understand?" bellowed the Sergeant. "You're not here to enjoy yourself! Give me that camera, you won't be needing it!" And off we went. So ended the fun bit and the serious business began. And my quads were starting to hurt!

The next 6 miles were sore, but, I must admit, reasonably enjoyable. Once the slight misunderstanding about racing and the meaning of life was out of the way, Sergeant Rod was his usual chatty self. He did take a few photos of me, which I suppose was a reasonable trade off. We also started to encounter the first of the participants in the Caledonian Challenge - on motorised buggies - but more of these later. We went through Derrydarroch checkpoint at 13:00, ducked under the A82 and headed towards Crianlarich. 45 miles and still OK, not tired though hot and sweaty. Up the hill past Bogle Glen, over the hill and then my legs!!! The downhill stretch back to the A82 layby where Billy was patiently waiting was agony! My quads were rebelling big time and my lack of sustenance was probably taking its toll. Poor Billy was having his first decent kip since Milngavie, but it lasted only 10 minutes before I arrived and he was on drink's duty again. I ran the next 3 miles to Tyndrum unaccompanied, but it was painful and very slow - though luckily not downhill.

Tyndrum at 16:00. A rest, toilet stop - some strange looks from Green Wellie Stop customers - and bliss! A pair of nail clippers magically appeared so I could trim my bruised toe nails! Mind you, I had to do that myself, since neither Billy nor Sergeant Rod wanted to go anywhere near my feet! Bending my legs to perform this simple operation was agony and took 5 minutes or more. While I was engaged in this manicure, a member of the film crew appeared and I was interviewed about the necessity of having short toe nails when running and the likely damage I had done to my feet so far! Very edifying.

After a 20 minutes break, with sandwiches and banana, Rod and I said farewell to Billy and set off again, heading for Bridge of Orchy. The rest had worked wonders, and the pain was manageable (with the help of a few co-codamol!). The track was good, though the slope down to the railway underpass was tricky and sore. This was the least memorable part of the run, though possibly because the pain in my legs was growing and I was becoming very self-absorbed - also tired, hot, sweaty and hungry - though I wouldn't admit it! Approaching Bridge of Orchy, Rod ran ahead and left me to do the last 2 miles alone. I surprised myself with a fair pace, and almost sprinted down the last 100 yards to the main road, across and on to the welcoming checkpoint. Welcoming but packed and chaotic! 40 cars packed into a space for 20 makes for some interesting manoeuvring.

Another short stop, then on alone while my helpers headed for Inveroran Hotel. Sergeant Rod wanted a pint! I toiled slowly up to Mam Carraigh, past a number of bemused hikers, took a few photos (I had retrieved my camera) and slowly descended to the Hotel - an hour and 20 minutes for 2 miles! I was in trouble both from tiredness and from Sergeant Rod! I needed to speed up, he said, to get as many miles completed before it got dark. I promised to try, but I wasn't capable of much more than a steady trot!

Rannoch Moor beckoned - and so did the midges. The weather was still beautifully sunny and hot - and so totally unsuitable for this race - and the clouds of insects attacked us remorselessly. We borrowed some repellent spray from a couple of generous fellow runners and set off towards the Moor. It was beautiful! Not the bleak, inhospitable wasteland I had expected. The main problem was the walkers! Drove of unmoving, cellphone bearing, ski-stick wielding hikers three or more abreast taking up every inch of path and totally oblivious to the poor, exhausted runner going in the wrong direction! This was undoubtedly the worst part of the race so far. Dodging from side-to-side, trying to keep to reasonable running surface and desperately hoping I didn't trip over walkers, ski-sticks or stones, I was not enjoying myself. Rod was scouting ahead, regularly returning with encouraging shouts of, "only a few miles to the middle of the Moor" and "time for another 10 minutes run." Eventually we reached Ba Bridge (67 miles), then crawled towards Kingshouse Hotel, the last mile alone in a stumbling run (Rod had gone ahead for another well-earned pint!) Two-and -three quarter hours for 9 miles. It was now 21:15, and I was weary! Not sleepy, but suffering from a mixture of hypoglycaemia and the effects of 20

hours on my feet in 20 degree heat and 80% humidity. The only positive was that the midges had little effect - my legs were dotted with red marks, but no itchiness!

10 minutes at Kingshouse then on again alone towards Altnafeagh and the dreaded Devil's Staircase. This section was the worst yet. Flat, but rocky and crisscrossed with little streams that required a minutes thought before I could attempt to stumble across. The last thing I wanted was a fall - I would never get up again! My quads were in agony and every step was a challenge. After a mile, I was passed by Pauline Harrop and partner - she was to be the last finisher in the race. She was moving quite freely - much to my envy! It took me an hour and a half to negotiate the track and Sergeant Rod was quite concerned when I finally reached Altnafeagh. It was getting dark, and there was little chance of us reaching Kinlochleven before nightfall. However, it was still dry and warm, so "no, we don't need any waterproofs. We'll get them at Kinlochleven." Fateful words indeed.

The Devil's Staircase did not live up to its name! This was actually quite easy - relatively speaking. Going uphill was definitely easier than the previous section, and the mile-and-a-half to the top was over in 20 minutes. Then came the worst time of my life! Obviously the Devil' Staircase is so named because it is the climb to Hell! And this is where my story began

The next two-and-a-half hours were the longest and worst of my life. My thighs shrieked with every step; I could only see for a yard or so in front of me where the spill of the torch lay; every step required a decision whether to step on or to avoid the rocks; streams crossed the path with what seemed like a two feet gap to be hurdled each time. And always Sergeant Rod: - "Only a few miles to go." "It gets easier a little further down." "Watch out for the big stream just in front." "Can you see the lights of Kinlochleven just down there?" "Only a few miles to go!!" All I could think of was "Lord, please let this end!" and my only reply was a mumbled "I can't do this!"

Two phone calls lightened the proceedings at this point, one from Billy - "Hurry up, there's a party on down here, and you're missing the fun." The other from work colleagues - at a party in Kilmarnock . The problem was, I was having great difficulty fathoming how to work the phone - and I certainly couldn't formulate a coherent reply!

Midnight came and went - I was managing about 1 mile every 30 minutes, and was beginning to think that if I just lay down and rested for a bit, maybe I'd feel better in an hour or two. Then came one o'clock . We had reached some easier track and Rod had just told me we had about a mile and a half to Kinlochleven (again) when he saw a flash of light from somewhere behind us. "Must be another runner catching us up," he said. Then a much bigger flash lit up the whole of the region – a fantastic sight! "That's lightning. " he said. " Strange", I thought, "where's the thunder?" Then the monsoon! The heavens opened and we were caught. In the open, no waterproofs, only running vests and light tops. The temperatures plummeted and within minutes I was shivering. Strangely, though, I didn't feel much more miserable than I had been before. A strange vision of me being struck by lightning through my head torch kept recurring, and even this didn't really upset me - at least I would be warm.

We reached Kinlochleven at 01:20 soaked, freezing and lost. What with 2 inches of water covering the ground and a constant downpour, my guide took a wrong turn and we ended up in the Smelter works! Eventually we entered the main street from the wrong end, checked in with the race marshals and found Billy and the car. Hypothermia, hypoglycaemia and exhaustion – not a good combination with 15 miles to go! A slow change of clothes (thanks, Billy), a drink then, at last, I sat down - the first time in 24 and a half hours. The warmth was bliss; the shivering gradually stopped and I felt myself slowly drift off. "2 hours sleep before we go again," said Rod. I didn't reply. The next thing I knew was a knock on the car window - it was a marshal – 04:00 "The Race is abandoned for safety reasons due to torrential rain and flooding."

Joy or despair? At that point I didn't think I could walk another step, but who knows. Rod reckoned I would have made it though Billy wouldn't have wanted me to continue. I was just glad to be warm!

We travelled to Fort William for the presentations and arrived in time to see the last finisher reach the Leisure Centre. She had reached Kinlochleven an hour or so before me, so was on her way out when the rain started. It sounded rough. George Douglas was stopped at Lundavra – only six miles to go. All told 48 finishers and 23 stopped for safety reasons.

The presentation was good, but a bit subdued. All those who had been stopped for safety reasons received their crystal goblet – a nice touch, but we know we didn't complete the 95 miles. But, what an experience! Not quite life-changing, but there's certainly nothing like it, and all future races will be anticlimactic.

Billy asked me whether I would do it again. It took me about 2 days to decide YES! – I have to finish.

Many thanks to Billy and Rod for guiding me through. Both have said they'll help again, so roll on the 24 th June!