

Pauline Walker

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK!!

2005

Oh dearie dear! It's almost 1.00 am and here I am at Milngavie Train Station AGAIN! I thought I'd said "never again" – but that was way back in 2002 and my memory had fooled me into thinking it wasn't so bad. I unstuck my tongue from the roof of my mouth and chatted to other runners as we were led (like lambs and you know what happens to them!) to the tunnel. I couldn't blame the chattering on the cold as it was positively balmy and I am wearing only shorts, tee-shirt and vest which are a bit of a novelty for Scotland in the small hours.

We're off up the steps, past the shops and into the woods, head torch on, with so many runners I didn't need to switch on my second torch. There was even a marshall to point the way and prevent dumplings from making the race longer than it is. There wasn't much talking going on – everyone concentrating on their wee pool of light. I started taking sips of my ginger beer almost immediately as it was so warm, almost tropical, with crickets and birds chirruping away I half expected to hear David Attenborough speaking in hushed tones doing a voiceover –

"Here we are in the Campsie Fells of Scotland witnessing the annual migration of the ultra distance runner, there are a variety of breeds and colours – look those two there with the vibrant green and orange plumage are Carnegie Harriers, note the anxious expressions, there's a long way to go and some will not make it to Fort William."

Two hours later with Drymen approaching I got the mobile out to let the troops know of my imminent arrival – ring ring – ring ring – ring ring – no answer! I arrived at Drymen with Russell and Fiona waiting with a fresh bottle and food which I grabbed whilst muttering that it would be useful if they had the phone switched on. I later found out that Fiona's phone was switched on but was sitting on the dashboard!

Up and over Conic Hill, dodging round the camera crew, I pussy footed my way down and into Balmaha, the first checkpoint, another bottle change, rice crispie bar and coffee to go. Another slick handover. It had been daylight for an hour or so but I still hadn't settled, Fiona told me that I would on the next section, well I did a bit but I was still looking for my groove. The next checkpoint was Rowardennan at 27 miles, I tried phoning but again without success, this time the problem was the trees and I couldn't get a signal. I had decided to take advantage of the proper bogs at Rowardennan and was heading towards them, I couldn't see my team (déjà vu 1998), but then heard a horn beeping – I'd run straight past them – apparently they were having a bit of a snooze! At least I didn't need to bang on the vehicle to wake them up. I had a change of socks and shoes with Fiona doing the foot thing whilst I ate some rice pudding and more coffee. They had decided that I hadn't eaten enough so sent me on my way with a flapjack. I also changed from bumbag to backpack with a two litre bladder as your team doesn't go into Inversnaid and it's a long time before you see them again.

I usually enjoy the challenge of the Loch Lomond section but this year it was very clammy and humid and I was wary of the wet boulders being slippery. At Inversnaid I picked up my bottle of water (with 8 grains of salt in it) rice crispie bar and half a banana from the Search and Rescue Team and chuntered on. I still wasn't feeling smooth and was becoming increasingly aware of iron rings around my thighs. I scooted through the checkpoint at Derrydarroch and onto the Tunnel at the A82 where Russell and Fiona were waiting for me. I was sookin' like mad on the fuel pipe to finish my ginger beer before changing back to the bumbag when Fiona insisted on a smile for the camera – but I reckon I was keeping well hydrated by the number of "bush breaks" required. I liked the shoes I had on but my feet were wet so changed socks, ate more rice pudding and a flapjack to go.

The humid conditions were getting to me I had a bit of a headache, the flapjack made me feel a bit sick and the iron rings on my thighs had tightened a notch. I laughed when a bloke said I looked as fresh as a daisy – I obviously looked better than I felt.

The next checkpoint, Tyndrum, is a major milestone as it marks 53 miles which is a "good" halfway, also I was looking forward to getting some hot soup, a ham roll and company. (And guys I didn't say anything at the time but I like two slices of ham in my roll!). Fiona and Val ran with me to Bridge of Orchy and with the hot food and company I managed to perk up a bit. We had been advised of a wheelchair event happening, I was expecting something like Tanni Grey-Thompson in a 4x4 type but what we got was the blue rinse brigade in trundley battery operated things!

The next stop was Bridge of Orchy and the midges weren't too bad this year. Lynne and Gail joined me for the section over Rannoch Moor. At last I began to feel good and picked up the pace and was moving really well. Playing chicken with the Caley Challenge walkers gave me a rush of adrenalin and they mostly moved out of my way with the exception of one guy in a blue shirt (oops sorry) as I charged along picking the best ground. I really enjoyed this section, it just whizzed by, one of those runner's highs you hear about.

I had worked out a rough timetable for a sub 24 hour and was a wee bit adrift at Tyndrum but after zipping along Rannoch Moor I thought that it might just be back on. I had the usual ravioli and more coffee and brought out my boots – that are

now tatty and battered but I'm reluctant to change a winning formula. Val joined me again and was now set for the run into Fort William. I had given her full rights to the pointy stick, told her to throw her 'Miss Sensible' hat out the window and get me to Fort William. I remember Fiona talking about Val's walker dodging technique last year and now having seen it first hand I'm impressed, she "morphs" in a 6'10" "don't mess with me dudette", all I had to do was tuck in behind and follow in her wake. Russell joined us at the foot of the Devil's Staircase and showed off his fresh legs as he scampered along the path. Val pointed out the scenic views as we reached the top. I have to admit that this year I hadn't really been taking in the splendour of our surroundings and it was nice to be given a little reminder.

I was not looking forward to the descent into Kinlochleven – basically because it hurts and it did. My thick cosy socks were a bit too tight on my fat feet so I decided to change them at the next stop. Fiona continued to do a marvelous job as "foot man", I had another ham roll and this time a cup of oxo and whilst I sat on my wee seat being tended to I gave an interview to a young man with a camera who complained about being tired!

As it was still daylight I was anxious to push on to get as far as possible along the Lairig Mor before dark fell. The path stretches out forever in a long ribbon in front of you so I didn't look and focused on the few feet in front. I had occasional glances to see if I could see the trees but knew I wouldn't – why do I do that??? I marched on, my feet hurt but I told myself that my legs were good and it's your legs that do all work, Val prompting me to the best ground, when to run, when to walk. At last Val said "look – there's the trees". Yeehaaa! And it's still light-ish! I knew that it was going to be really very black dark in the spooky woods (it's dark there on a sunny afternoon!) but to get to the trees still in light gave me a great boost.

Richie, his minder, Val and I pushed on into the twilight. We reached Lundavra where I was pleased to see the troops, someone asked if I wanted coffee. Yes, good idea, in fact Val was carrying a flask of coffee which I had forgotten about so said I'll have some but I wasn't stopping they'd have to catch up with me. I heard some mutterings but I just let them get on with it, there was no way I was going to stop or slow down now – I might not get moving again. I was totally focused on only one thing – which was "full steam ahead to Fort William". Fiona also joined us at this point – great – another torch would definitely come in handy. I was again impressed with Val's knowledge of the path in the inky blackness with only a head torch, her hand torch was pointing backwards at my feet.

Eventually we reached the stile which marks the end of the woods and the start of the track down into Fort William – another thigh crunching descent. Fiona and Val insisted that it was runnable, so run we did. I focused on the light from my torch a few feet ahead and like a carrot on a stick I tried to reach it and whilst Fiona and Val chatted away quite the thing I concentrated on my breathing. I was trying to keep an eye out for the Braveheart car park but missed it, we were on the road, the final straight and the last mile – Fort William here I come. I dodged a bloke bent double throwing up whilst his minders stood by patiently, put my torch away and headed for the roundabout. I verbally "tagged" the signpost at the Edinburgh Woolly mill which marks the finish of the Way but not the finish of the race, I have to continue on to the Lochaber Leisure Centre, batter through the doors, wake up the man at the desk and tell him my number. I can see the Leisure Centre, suddenly my emotions gang up in my throat which makes breathing a bit awkward, across the car park, through the doors – "NUMBER 2 HAS FINISHED!!" (The chap didn't need waking up he heard me coming).

A very nice lady came to cut off my wrist band which would have been used to identify my bones had they been found in a ditch! My time – 23 hours 19 minutes and 4 seconds – ooyah booyah and absolutely fandoublydan bloody brilliant!! I knew I was on for a sub 24 hours but looking at the numbers on my watch my brain didn't register by how much it just kept telling me to move forward and move forward NOW!

After a wee rest, a chat with Richie confirming that we'd never do it again, a shower, it was now time to snuggle into the blankets and sleeping bags in the car for a few hours kip. I looked through the doors and the rain was just chucking down, Russell very kindly brought the car to the door so that I could hobble in without getting wet. As I cocooned myself on the back seat I was aware of the rain battering down on the roof and felt sorry for the poor souls still out there. Sadly we heard later that due to heavy rain, flash flooding and hailstones on the Devil's Staircase the race had been stopped for safety reasons. All those reaching Kinghouse or the checkpoints after Kinghouse at the time the race was stopped would be deemed finishers but would not be given a time.

This is very much a team event and without my troops I would never have reached Fort William so it is with huge gratitude and thanks to Russell for doing most of the driving, I'm glad you enjoyed your skip over the Devil, to Fiona (the things she did to my feet go above and beyond the call of duty), to Val for putting up with me for 30-odd miles and to Lynne and Gail (our newest member of the WHW family) for a great section along Rannoch Moor.

Now this "never again" thing, I do have a tiny wee problem in that I now have five crystal goblets – and you need six for a set don't you??

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