

# Phil Mestecky

## West Highland Way Race

June 18th 2005

Phil Tipping and I along with 88 runners with head-torches set off from Milngavie at 1am on Saturday 18th June in very uncomfortable conditions - tropical temperatures of 18 oC and high humidity. Despite a very sedate pace we were soon sweating profusely and sucking furiously on our water tubes. We passed Drymen already significantly down on our race schedule which we'd written with a view to giving ourselves a shot at completing the race in 24 hours. I must admit to being a bit agitated about this as the early stages were meant to be the easiest of the race.

The combination of sleep deprivation ( 1am must be the very worst time to start a day-long endurance race), the heat and humidity and a dodgy stomach was having an effect. Getting up and down Conic Hill was a struggle and it was with some relief that we bowled into the 1st checkpoint at Balmaha where Adrian was waiting for us with fresh clothes, soup and sandwiches.

Setting off on leg 2 we were starting to feel a bit bowelly having not had a chance to "go" since leaving Crieff at 10pm. This was one of my big worries about the race as there are types of "runs" that I really don't like very much. However, I was still feeling confident but itching (yes, our friends the midgies were with us again) to get on past Loch Lomond and into the Highlands proper. Between Rowardennan and Inversnaid the track got progressively worse and our mph declined to less than 3. We both took the opportunity of a secluded part of the route to take a pit stop followed by a dose of immodium and from then on all worries on that front were dispelled.

Having reached Inversnaid we gratefully glugged the water provided by the checkpoint people and sat down to stuff some food down us. From Inversnaid, the path was still very tricky with lots of rocks and tree roots to negotiate. After 1½ miles we were both in unknown territory – neither of us had run more than 36 miles before. We were moving OK but, this was a tough section for both Phil and me. We kept up a decent pace for a few miles and then felt morale slipping away as the pace declined to a walk. We were much less than half way and already very sleepy and fatigued. We were also aware of the enormity of the task ahead and for a while it did not seem remotely possible that we'd make it. I was really looking forward to seeing Liz and Jim at Derrydaroch and to getting some decent food inside me.

When we arrived at Derrydaroch, immediately the situation improved. There waiting for us was Liz and Jim. They'd set up our two blue chairs next to each other and we could see and smell the wonderful pasta steaming away in the pot. Then Jim announced that we were to get foot massages! Phil had his while I changed my clothes and got outside a fair portion of the pasta. Then it was my turn. It's difficult to explain why this was so good. I think part of it was that anyone prepared to handle my feet after 44 miles of muddy and dusty tracks was really prepared to do anything to support our attempt at this challenge. Part of it was the look of envy we got from other competitors and the fear in the eyes of other support teams who might be asked to follow suit. But mostly it was the pleasure, pain and tickling feeling that seemed to bring new life into me from the toes up.

Life was good again as we left Derrydaroch after a full 30 minute stop and headed towards Crianlarich. Phil and I were fairly eating up the ground and overtook several runners over the next couple of miles.

As we approached Tyndrum there was David Adams cheering us in enthusiastically. It was great to see him and to catch some of his infectious optimism. Again the blue chairs were there, the steaming food (soup this time) and Jim, ready with the massage cream. This space that Liz and Jim created began to feel like home to me. I looked forward to it and missed it when I was away. I felt secure and happy sitting there being so well looked after. I felt fully supported and fully confident that I would justify this support by finishing.

Also among those present was Simon who had come across from Crieff in his van. For some reason he didn't stop laughing. He laughed at the state of us when we arrived. He laughed when Jim started in on the massage. He laughed at the sticking plaster I'd put on my back to prevent rubbing. He laughed particularly hard when it was time waddle off on the next leg as we tried to work the stiffness out our legs. It is amazing how it cheered me up to have such a happy bunch around me.

The next leg was an easy one, 6.5 miles on a fairly flat track. The clouds had broken by this stage and the sun was beating down on us which didn't exactly help our physical or mental state. By the time we reached Bridge of Orchy nearly 60 miles into the run we were both very tired. Simon, Liz and Jim did their best to encourage us, but it was quite difficult to forget that we still had 35 miles left to go.

Leaving Bridge of Orchy, our plod up the hill was painfully slow. Finally we breasted the hill and began our descent. However, if anything our speed decreased going down the other side. We finally reached the road and climbed slowly out of Inveroran and up onto Rannoch Moor.

As we approached the descent towards the Kingshouse, Simon appeared running uphill and joined us for the run in to the checkpoint. It was an encouraging thought that there was only one more checkpoint after this one before the end!

We sat down and went through our usual routine, at least until it started raining quite heavily at which point Phil took refuge in the back of Simon's van and I sat in the cab upfront tending to a major blister that had appeared since Bridge-of-Orchy. By the sounds of it Liz, Jim and Simon had had a good time waiting for us at the Kingshouse. Two pints of Guinness for Simon, two beers for Jim and two glasses of wine for Liz plus a good slap-up meal helped them to pass the time. Definitely the high-point for the support team!

Phil seemed in good spirits and determined to finish. There were still 23 miles to go, but only one more stop before the finish. It really seemed do-able for us both.

We set off along the road swaggering from side-to-side, stiff and bow-legged like a couple of cowboys. Phil was tired and my knee had started to give me some serious discomfort. The pace was slow, but I wasn't too bothered as we had the Devil's Staircase to climb so it would be good not to be too knackered by the time we started on that. However, it proceeded to get slower and slower and runners started to come past us.

Phil finally called me to halt so he could sit down. He said he felt sick and after a moment or two proceeded to vomit huge volumes of yellow liquid mixed with all the food he consumed since Derrydaroch. This was bad news. He immediately felt better but now had no food inside him and still 21 miles to go. He took on some chocolate and said he felt a bit better so we set off again. After another hour we reached the foot of the Devil's Staircase at the top of Glen Coe.

It had taken us two hours to go little more than 2 miles. To me the implication was obvious. If it had taken us two hours to do 2 fairly flat miles it would take us at least another 6 hours maybe more to get to Kinlochleven and then how long to do the last 14? Phil had no food inside him. It was getting late and we were about to enter the most inhospitable section of the course. If we set off up that hill we would be a case for the mountain rescue guys.

So I said to him, "Do you think you're up to this?" I could see the struggle going on inside him. A part of him must have been cursing me for asking the question. Initially he said, "Yes, I can." So I asked him "How can we speed up then as we won't make it at this pace and if you get worse when we're up there then we'll both be in trouble." He thought about it for a while and finally agreed that he wasn't going any further. This was a very tough decision but in the circumstances (and also with hindsight) it was the right one.

After arranging for Liz and Jim to come back for him, I left Phil and teamed up with another competitor and his support runner and set off up the Devil's Staircase.

Tony was the runner and Brett his support runner. They set a fairly stiff pace going up the Staircase. Tony seemed in good form and Brett was bubbly and enthusiastic – after all, he hadn't just run 75 miles. We reached the top and began the long slow descent towards Kinlochleven.

By now my left knee was very sore. The pain was spreading from the back of my knee up into my hamstring. Each step was difficult, but I felt totally committed – not just to finish the race but also to not be a burden to my new-found running companions. I was longing for this section to finish so I could get started on the final leg. It was already dark as we approached Kinlochleven past the Alcan works. The run-in to the checkpoint was longer than I expected, but eventually we arrived and I met up with Liz and Jim once more.

Kinlochleven may be picturesque, the people may be lovely and the town may be a shining example to the rest of Scotland. But to me at 11.45 on Saturday night having run 81 miles it was Hell on Earth. Never have I seen and been eaten by so many midges. Liz and Jim, and most other people out and about in Kinlochleven looked weird, like satanic priests, with their green midge-nets over their heads.

As I sat there trying to get a mouthful of soup without the midgey croutons, I felt that much of the excitement and enthusiasm had gone out of the whole enterprise with Phil fast asleep in the car and out of the race. I wanted to finish, get my race T-shirt and go home to bed.

Liz offered to help me stretch my leg before I set off again. I lay down on a towel on the road and Liz lifted my leg up. When I looked at it I saw it was almost black with a covering of midgies. By this stage I didn't care too much and just wanted to get on with the final push for home.

It was warm and humid but there was a hint of a moon and no sign of rain so as I packed my bag for the last 14 mile stretch I weighed my waterproof clothes and decided it was too much excess baggage and tossed it carelessly aside. At 12.00 midnight I met up again with Brett and Tony. I said those wonderful words to Liz: "See you at the finish" and set off up the road.

My leg hurt a lot still. I think that Brett and Tony were a bit concerned that I might slow them down or even not be able to make it. So, as we started up the hill out of Midge City, I set the pace and pushed on hard. It really hurt. Each step was seriously painful and I had 14 miles to put up with it. I really hoped the pain would ease as I loosened up, but it didn't. As we climbed we could see a couple of head torches ahead. We closed the gap and overtook them with scarcely a word. And on we went.

As we reached the long flat section we were going well and morale was good. I knew we would make it. The first signs of rain were most welcome as it was still very warm. Then the light drizzle turned into steady rain and then suddenly "whoosh" the heavens opened and the rain came down in sheets. Brett asked me if I had my waterproofs with me. I sheepishly admitted that I'd left mine at the last checkpoint and was relieved to hear that I wasn't the only idiot as neither he nor Tony had brought theirs.

We were completely soaked and getting wet and very cold. We decided to run to keep warm. By now the sky was being illuminated by the regular flashes of a big electrical storm. The track was now ankle deep in water and the burns were in spate. And on we ran.

We kept it going for 40 minutes during which time we caught up with several pairs of runners. I have to admit that I was quite scared. The lightning was getting closer and more violent. I was only partially comforted when Brett mentioned he was taller than me by fully 2 inches and adopted a sort of stooped hobbling run in the hope that the bolt would find something higher than me (i.e. him) to strike. Tony kept telling me that the lightning wasn't in the glen yet so there was no need to stop and adopt the strike-my-behind position that gives you a fighting chance of surviving a direct hit. Spurred on by fear and by cold we continued to make excellent progress and eventually emerged at an impromptu checkpoint which Tony's support crew had also managed to find.

By this time the rain had eased and the panic was over. We passed a few others in the woods before finally emerging to catch a vague hint of Ben Nevis through the mist and the lights of Fort William about 3 miles off.

As we descended the forestry road we briefly went by another couple of runners who were walking slowly down. No sooner had we done that than they broke into a run and re-took us. I don't think we'd slowed at this point but had reached an attitude stoic determination to finish into which neither running nor competing with fellow WHW-ers featured.

The track seemed to go on for a long, long time. My leg, which had seemed to recover during the latter stages of our 40 minute run, began hurting worse than ever and I felt myself going quiet and introspective. Brett continued to talk enough for all three of us, I think this time it was about various types of birds, mainly Owls I seem to remember, when I saw the welcome sight of the road into Fort William.

As we turned onto the pavement I could see two figures in the mist that had a vaguely familiar look to them. As we got closer I could see it was Liz and Jim who had walked down to meet us.

What a wonderful feeling. We'd done it! Keep walking to the roundabout and then break into some sort of run to finish. The run was frankly pathetic. I was hobbling so much by this stage I was in danger of going in circles and Tony seemed very tired and quiet too.

It was great to get a cheer and a round of applause from those that were there, but it was a strangely low-key finish to such an epic journey. I went to the reception window and handed over my hospital tag insisting that Tony and I should be recorded as exactly equal times and position and then went over to sit down and be nursed by Jim and Liz once more.

After a few moments and a few sips of coffee I was able to look around and share congratulations with the other runners and officials that were milling about. I then tried to stand up to make my way to the shower.

The pain and stiffness in my left leg was unbelievable. It had moved from my knee to my calf. It had gone completely solid and unresponsive and was of no use to me whatsoever. Jim lent me his shoulder to lean on and helped me to the showers.

After I'd got changed I returned to the reception area just as Gus, a runner with whom we had run most of the Loch Lomond section, arrived in most dramatic style. Having survived 95 tough miles he slipped at the doorway of the leisure centre and crashed into the doors with an almighty bang. He was understandably shaken by the experience but was soon chatting and laughing again.

A woman runner who had finished just ahead of me briefly lost consciousness and began to have a fit right there in front of us and was eventually taken away by an ambulance crew. Other casualties of the day included one finisher coughing up blood and another runner being taken off the Devil's Staircase following some sort of blackout or seizure.

These unfortunate incidents help to remind you how serious a challenge this is and how simply completing the course is an awesome accomplishment. I only wish that things had been different for Phil. As it turned out the organizers called a

halt to the race in the midst of the bad weather after just 49 runners had made it through. In a way this vindicates my decision to abandon Phil at the Devil's Staircase as, had I stayed with him, neither of us would have been able to finish. So will I run the race again? Yes. Maybe not next year, but I do need to do it again now that I know what it's all about. I do need to break 24 hours, get a much higher finishing position and just really find out what I am capable of in this awesome event....