

Susan Gray

## West Highland Way Race 2005

In the final week of the build up to the race I was a nervous wreck, not about the task I was about to undertake (covering 95 miles in 35 hours or less), but because I was absolutely petrified I would get ill in the final few days before the run!!!!. However, thankfully this did not happen and Friday rolled around with me injury and illness free – all was going to be well (or so I thought!).

I had a really good feeling about the race: it was the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the run and the 21<sup>st</sup> features very strongly in my life; all my training runs had gone really well and I was blessed with good weather for all of them (someone 'up above' was watching out for me) and I had no doubt this would continue for the duration of the race; going into the Sunday (19<sup>th</sup>) would mean I would be running and finishing on Father's Day (I took this to be a good omen as I was running this race in memory of my Dad). So, all in all, I was well up for the run!

We picked up the hired car at Prestwick Airport at 4pm, not quite the station wagon we thought we were going to get!! Instead a Renault Scenic, which was a bit tight on boot space for all the equipment we had. You would think we were travelling across the world the amount of gear we had, but it was necessary to be prepared for all eventualities.

We set off for Milngavie just after 10pm on a warm and very muggy night (about 15 ° C) and arrived just after 11pm. What a sight greeted us as we turned the corner into the car park – cars, vans and the odd motor-home or two scattered around and people sitting out on chairs having picnics! After securing a parking space I headed over into the train station waiting room to register. A wrist tag, resembling something you might have to wear in hospital (did the organisers know something I didn't!?) was placed around my right wrist. I was asked if it was loose enough and I said I thought so, and then the marshal asked me if I puffed?!? I said I didn't puff unless I was running up hills!! – but then I realised he was talking about whether my arms and wrists would puff up over the duration of the race, as he didn't want the band to get too tight!! Doh!!! I was handed a small bum bag with my special race top in it and picked up the clothes I had ordered for my fantastic back up team – Julie and Robbie in the car, and Ian and Charlotte with me on foot from Kingshouse.

I then met up with Michael, Alan and the rest of the camera crew who were filming the race this year. I introduced Michael to Julie and Robbie and then just wandered around chatting to people I knew. I was told to go and collect my bottle of beer supplied by the Bridge of Allan Brewery. I had to tell the chap my name and race number (34) and couldn't understand why he took so long going through all the bottles of beer – surely I could just get the first one that came to hand? Only once I received it did I realise why he was taking so long to get me a beer – these ones had a special label with my name printed on them – what a fantastic touch.

Prior to the start of the race, I also had the chance to introduce myself to Dario (I had spoken to him on the phone several times but had never met him in person). He asked me how I was feeling and I responded that I felt remarkably calm and relaxed. To which he replied "well you shouldn't be..... you should be sh\*tting yourself by now!!!!" However, despite these words of 'encouragement' I was not deterred and was eager to get going. So many times on training runs I had wished I was doing the actual race and now here I was about to embark on probably the toughest physical and mental challenge of my life. With that in mind I headed to the station waiting room to get in the toilet queue again!!! However, as the queue was moving extremely slowly and Dario was running around saying the race briefing was about to start I really couldn't wait and was forced to go to a nearby bush – sorry Milngavie!! Note to support teams – before the race starts could you let runners go to the toilet first, their need is probably greater than yours!

At 1 am sharp the race started – not the usual sprint to get into a good position, more like a shuffle through the underpass and along the pedestrian precinct to the official start of the WHW. Not sure what the locals who had been chucked out of the pubs thought about it all – must have been a bizarre sight!! Things got off well and I was running in a small group through Mugdock Park. It was very warm and I soon realised I had started with too many layers of clothes on. However, I did not want to stop so soon into the race to start taking layers off so I just kept going. I was surprised at how quickly the field stretched out. I thought we would be running as a group for quite some time. People came and went and I met up with several different runners on the first section from Milngavie to Drymen, one of them being my work colleague Tony. We ran the latter half of the first section together, and it was good to have some company during this early stage in the dark. On arrival at the bottom of the field before getting to the first meeting place at Drymen I switched on my flashing arm band so my support team would be able to spot me and lead me to the car. However, they weren't even looking for me! But to be fair to them, they had a prime parking spot right by where the WHW passes, so there was no need for them to come looking for me. As soon as I got to the car there was a bright light attached to a camera in my face, and behind the camera – Michael. I was asked how things were going and replied that everything was going really well (I hadn't anticipated any problems at this early stage in the race). It took me 2:28mins to reach Drymen, 2mins ahead of schedule. After a top up of water and an energy gel I was off again heading for Conic Hill. By now it was starting to get light so I discarded my head torch. I passed a couple of guys on the way up through the forest (or what is left of it after all the tree felling) and headed over to start the climb up Conic Hill. I hadn't been looking forward to this section – not so much for the uphill part, but for the descent down the other side, which I knew would play havoc with my knees. Just as I was coming over the top of the hill I was met by Michael who had climbed up from

Balmaha – nutter!! I tried to put a bit of a run on for the cameras on the level part but as soon as I hit the descent I was down to a walk to protect my knees.

I arrived at the first official check point in Balmaha car park after 4:16mins, in a position of 75 th. I had sent a text to my support team to get some food ready for me – jam buttie and rice pudding (at 5.20am !!). I got a change of t-shirt, socks and shoes here. However, I struggled to eat the food prepared, I managed about ¾ of the sandwich and nothing else. Although I didn't know it yet, this was to be a recurring theme for the duration of my run. Whilst in the car park, Michael arrived back, he must have descended almost as quickly as me. He was looking in pretty good shape – which is more than can be said for his jeans, which were muddy and torn to shreds at the bottom (of the legs)!! The descent into Balmaha had taken its toll on my left knee and my IT (iliotibial) band was starting to aggravate my knee joint. I knew from this point onwards that I would be in pain for the rest of the race, but, from previous training runs, I knew I could tolerate the pain and it wouldn't stop me from continuing.

I left Balmaha for the long run up Loch Lomondside – the first section from Balmaha to Rowardennan is only about 7.5 miles but seems twice as long. I was still managing to run most of it, but was now starting to feel quite sick. This section took me longer than I had planned (2:15mins instead of 1:50mins). I was now concerned about making the next official check point at Inversnaid within the allotted time (9 hours max). I was met at Rowardennan by my brother (Robbie) and put in a bit of a run for him (his comment at the check point at Balmaha had been 'are you actually going to run some of this race – every time I see you, you are walking!'). I only stopped briefly to fill up on water and chucked a couple of bagels in my camel pack, then I was off again. Most of the section from Rowardennan to Inversnaid is 'runable' and I managed to keep going quite well along this section. However, once you get off the fire track things become a bit more tricky and involve scrambling over rocks at times. I was so glad to see Inversnaid come into view as I knew that I had made it within the time slot and could relax a bit. Michael was there to greet me with some very attractive head gear (loved the green midge net Mike!) and camera in tow!!!!!! He had come up Loch Lomondside on a small speed boat and was going to get the boat back over to Inveruglas to meet up with Julie and Robbie again. After a brief stop to fill up with water I was ready for the off again. However, first port of call was the toilet – at which time I had to point out to Michael that I was heading to the toilet and not setting off on my run so there was no need to film this bit!. It had taken me 8:38mins to get to Inversnaid (I had a whole 22mins to spare!! – bit tight) and was now in 69 th position.

The section from Inversnaid to Beinglas farm was horrendous to say the least. It was really not possible to run much of it at all and was quite treacherous in places. I passed a few walkers on this section, who were kind enough to let me pass (they reckoned I was faster than them but I wasn't so sure). Knee really starting to hurt now, and feeling of nausea still present. It was a long slow slog to Beinglas farm. When I saw Robbie he asked if I had stopped for a picnic along the way!!!!!!!!!!!! I had another change of clothes at this stage. Earlier I had tried to text the support team to tell them what food I would like brought over to the farm from the car park at Inverarnan hotel. However, because of poor reception along this stretch of the way, they never received my text. Julie did a good job of guessing what I might want to eat and basically put one of everything in the bag. In fact, throughout the whole time Julie was fantastic – she always made sure I got what I wanted, even if it did take her a while to find some things (although I won't mention the chewing gum situation!!!!). However, again I found I could not really eat anything – I was hungry but the thought of eating made me feel sick. I managed a Frutini and that was it. I am not sure why I felt so sick the whole time – I had practiced eating on all my long training runs and it had never been a problem before. Usually I could scoff my way through a packet of jaffa cakes, bagels, sweets, gels, fruit and crumpets and feel none the worse for it. Perhaps it was the heat and humidity? Despite not being able to eat much I made sure I forced some gels down and took on loads and loads of water, I did not want to become dehydrated as that would probably have been the end of me. My camel pack weighted a tonne (slight exaggeration) but I wanted to make sure I had enough water to last me between the sections. Previous experience had taught me not to drink from streams, but I won't go into detail here!!!

The next official check point was at Derrydarroch Farm, and I got there in 12:21mins (cut off time 13 hours!!) and had dropped a few positions down to 71 st. In training runs I had made it to this point in 11:30mins so I knew things weren't going as well as they could have been. I stopped for a brief chat with a race marshal then headed off on the long stretch to Tyndrum.

Most of this section is quite good going but a steep descent down to St Fillans further aggravated my knee. At one stage I was walking down the hill backwards, which was quite a relief for my aching knees but I kept losing my balance and realised I was more likely to fall and injure myself so started walking down forwards again. I met Alan, from Central club on the descent and he walked with me for a bit of the way. It was nice to have some company for a while as it took my mind off of how miserable I was feeling. I was really starting to struggle now, even on the flat sections and seemed to be walking more than I was running. I think the lack of food was starting to take its toll. However, I realised that I needed to take on board some energy to stop me from becoming hypoglycaemic, so I forced the gels down to keep me going.

I was so relieved to get to Tyndrum, as usual Robbie had walked out a bit to meet me (with Michael in tow) which was a brilliant sight for me to see. He constantly offered me words of encouragement and kept me informed of my time and progress. I was concerned that I had slowed down quite a bit and asked him when I had to get to Bridge of Orchy by? – 7pm was the answer!!!!!!, it was now 4.15pm . Plenty of time you may think, but I had been considering having a substantial break at Tyndrum before heading off again – this was no longer an option for me. I lay on the ground at the back of the car and put my feet up in the boot while Robbie sprayed my legs with Ralgex Ice and I ate an ice lolly!! I managed to have a chat with Mum on the mobile, she was on her way up to Kingshouse with one of my support

runners, Charlotte. I could tell by now that all concerned were getting a bit worried about the lack of food I was having. They kept telling me I needed to eat something and, as an Exercise Physiologist, I knew this myself. However, it is one thing knowing what to do and another trying to do it when you feel so ill.

I set off again from Tyndrum (now in 67 th position and having been on the go for over 15 hours). Once I climbed out of Tyndrum I was able to start running again – although I liken it to an ‘old man shuffle’ whereby I was simply putting one foot in front of the other at a slightly quicker pace than walking. Hardly very economical or energy efficient but at least I covered the ground slightly faster than if I were walking. By now I was starting to meet walkers coming in the other direction who were doing the Caledonian Challenge. Despite what I had been told about the walkers, the majority of them were very pleasant and gave me plenty of encouragement to keep going. As I started to descend down to Bridge of Orchy station I saw 2 ladies heading up towards me. ‘They are not very well equipped for the Caledonian Challenge’ I thought to myself. It was only when they got closer that I realised it was my Mum and Charlotte who had walked out to meet me!!!! Really must start wearing my glasses more often!

I reached Bridge of Orchy in 17:26mins in a position of 65 th, but by now was well behind my schedule. Charlotte gave me a handful of Arnica to help with the sore legs, but apart from that I had nothing to eat at this checkpoint either. I was keen to just keep going and so pressed on to Kingshouse. By now the walkers were coming thick and fast. I am afraid to say that, despite seeing me coming in the opposite direction, some made no attempt to get out of my way and continued to walk 2, 3 or 4 abreast.

I was now down to walking all the time, I did try to put in a few jogs but really felt that I could cover the ground just as quickly walking and would expend less energy. Just after Victoria Bridge I had to stop for a call of nature (or ‘doing a Paula’ as it is now known). This was not easy considering the number of walkers coming the other way and the lack of ample tree cover. However, in times of desperation, needs must and I dove off the path and tried to hide behind a couple of trees. Big mistake, as the total midge population of Victoria Bridge were also hiding in the trees!!!!!!! I have never P’d so quickly in all my life!

I carried on at my briskish walking pace – still feeling sick and starting to doubt whether I would make it or not as I still has the dreaded section down into Kinlochleven to contend with. However, I tried to put those thoughts out of my mind and told myself just to concentrate on making it to Kingshouse. With about 6 miles to go I saw a chap running towards me who I thought I recognised – it was Ian, one of my support runners. He had heard that I was struggling a bit and had come out to meet me. It was really good to have some company now and he did a brilliant job of keeping me going both mentally and physically. I had also sent a text to my Mum to ask her to walk out to meet me with the ‘Skin so Soft’ as the midges were really bad and I had forgotten to reapply the repellent at Bridge of Orchy . However, before Mum could get to us, the midges were driving Ian and I mad, so we accosted a couple of walkers and asked if they had any repellent we could use. They did and thanks guys, you saved us from going insane!

Eventually we met Mum heading out to meet us and also Ian’s sister and brother-in-law – quite a party!!!!!!! At Kingshouse I afforded myself a sit down of about 30mins and a change of clothes in to some leggings as it was now starting to get a bit cooler. I stuck a hat and a waterproof in my pack, just in case and then we were ready for the off. I had now been on the go for 21:27mins and was in 63 rd position. I was quite apprehensive about heading off into the night again, but was now in the capable hands of Ian and Charlotte so knew that nothing untoward would happen to me. We passed quite a few ‘runners’ just after Kingshouse, some of whom were in quite a bad way and we wondered whether they would make it to Kinlochleven in time.

The Devil’s Staircase was tough going as I had no energy left in my legs. However, the climb didn’t go on for too long and soon we were at the summit and heading back down into Kinlochleven. A shower of rain started so we all stopped to put on our waterproofs. It was just a shower we kept saying and, at first that was all it was. It soon went off, but was quickly followed by a heavier shower and thunder and lightning. I remember saying to Ian and Charlotte in a sarcastic way ‘could the rain get any heavier?!’ and the answer to that one was a resounding YES!!!!!! The storm was heading our way, the thunder was getting louder and the lightning was getting closer. It was quite exhilarating and scary at the same time. At one point I was conscious that I was walking hunched over – not because of fatigue but because I didn’t want to be the highest point on the path!! Lightning strikes the highest point I’ve been told, and isn’t it the job of the support team to get me to the finish – even if they have to take few lightning bolts in the process?!

It was such a surreal experience walking in torrential rain, in the pitch black (except from when the lightning lit up the sky) and listening to Charlotte and Ian telling some of the most awful jokes I have ever heard (note to self – buy them a joke book before next year!). By now I had gone quite quiet and was happy just to listen to Ian and Charlotte’s inane banter – however they thought that I kept falling asleep. As if! with all the thunder crashing around us. It became quite treacherous coming down the path, rocks were now really slippery and small rivers were starting to flow down the path. We had long given up trying to keep our feet dry by avoiding puddles – there were no puddles, just rivers!!! We did chat about whether the run would be cancelled because of the weather and I remember saying part of me hoped that it would but that a bigger part of me hoped that it wouldn’t (looking back now I know I didn’t really mean that I wanted the race to be stopped but at the time it seemed like a glimmer of hope – until you have experienced something as extreme as this you will not understand all the thoughts and feelings that go through your mind).

My knee was really painful by now, especially on the steeper down hill sections, and I lagged behind Ian and Charlotte on several occasions, However, every now and then they would turn around and I would be illuminated by their head torches as they made sure I was still with them (in body if not in mind!). I cannot express my thanks and appreciation to these two guys enough. Not only had they given up their weekend and, more importantly, their Saturday night, but they were walking through a thunder storm with me and were totally drenched. Thanks guys, I owe you big time. In fact, as a gesture of appreciation, I will let you guys support me next year when I do it all over again! J

We eventually arrive, drookit wet, in Kinlochleven at 3am . I had now been on the go for 26:04mins and knew that having made it this far I was going to finish. Robbie gave me the time briefs and told me I could afford to stop for an hour then head off at first light for Fort William . I virtually stripped off outside the car (hope that wasn't all caught on camera!) and got into some dry clothes and had a lovely cup of hot tea. I distinctly remember saying to Michael that I was never going to do this again and that I wanted him to get me saying that on camera!!!

After a break we were just getting our packs ready for the final push in to Fort William – dry waterproofs, water, foil survival blankets (just in case). We were just about to step out the car when the heavens opened again with another torrential downpour so we decided to wait a few minutes. At that, a marshal came up and told us the race was stopping at Kinlochleven as it was now too dangerous to continue!!! When I heard this news I just felt numb – I did not feel relieved, happy, sad or anything really. It was a really gloomy drive from Kinlochleven to Fort William and nobody spoke at all. To have gotten so close to the end .....

At Fort William I wanted to see Tony as I heard he had finished and I wanted to congratulate him. We made ourselves a cup of tea at the leisure centre then I met Tony. He was very sympathetic about my situation and then it all just hit me what had just happened. I burst into tears and cried on my Mum's shoulder – I couldn't believe I had been stopped with only 14 miles to go, especially as I knew I was capable of finishing. However, I should point out that I totally respect and understand the Race Organiser's decision, and had I been in charge I would have made the same decision. It was just really hard to take as I had been preparing for this day for 8 months!!! I was pretty inconsolable at this stage.

We headed to the hotel and after showers all round, 5 of us settled down for a couple of hours sleep. When I woke up I thought it had all been a dream and that I had really finished the race and I had to ask my Mum 'had I really not finished?' We decided to stay for the prize giving and it was good to meet up with people I had not seen since the start or very early on in the race.

My name was not on the finishing list so I assumed I was not getting a race memento (crystal goblet). I must admit, at times throughout the prize giving I really thought I was going to start crying again, not because I was not going to get a goblet, but because I had come so far only to be beaten by the weather.

Once all the people on the finishing list had received their goblets Dario announced that everyone who was stopped because of the weather but who had made it to Kingshouse or Kinlochleven were classified as finishers and would be receiving a goblet. When it came to me, Dario said some really nice things about me (thank you Dario). If I remember correctly it went something like how 'he had no doubt I would have finished as I was really bright and coherent at every checkpoint' (well that will be a first –me being bright and coherent!!).

Although I was deemed to have finished the race I didn't feel that I had as I did not complete the full 95 miles. Even before the prize giving was over, Julie and I had decided that we would be back next year – I need to get closure on this one. Of course the weather could be just as bad or worse next year, I could get injured on the Way, or fall ill before the big day – but I have to give it a go, I have to beat it and put it to rest.

Now, 11/12 days after the event, I still feel a great sense of sadness and disappointment about the outcome of the weekend of 18 th/ 19 th June 2005 . However, life goes on and I have to take some positives away from the experience:

- I raised over £1850 in memory of my Dad and for the RNLI and the SSPCA
- I feel that I have a closer bond with my support team (all of them) which cannot be broken and which I will always cherish
- I feel a closeness to the wider 'family' of the WHW race and have made some new friends along the way
- I will be back, fitter, stronger and with more experience next year