

So is it a very popular race, then?

The Athol & Breadalbane Highland Games, Saturday August 13th 2005. More kilts per square metre than I have ever seen, despite three years in Edinburgh in my youth. Shots being put, hammers flying, pipe bands playing, Scottish girls – and boys – dancing, cabers being tossed, kiddies racing, the lot.

I was in Scotland for a week's hols with the rellies. Like many of us I am in the habit of looking in the FRA calendar for nearby fell races – and, this time of year, I expect one or more each evening to choose from. Not so in Scotland.

For a start, they're not (most of them) in the FRA handbook. Ah well, there's always the web. And, jolly good, about eight races to choose from. Trouble is, we're off to Argyll, 40 miles south of Oban. The races are in Aberdeenshire. Or the Outer Hebrides. Difficult to pop over for the evening. There's just one that fits the bill – local (only 120 miles drive to get there) and it's on the Saturday at the end of the holiday. I can go on my way home. The Aberfeldy hill race. That's near Pitlochry. And there's a telephone number.

I really like those answer machines – don't you? Even better when there's a pleasant Scots voice, telling you she's not there at the moment. I'd figured that out.

The brother in law had driven up from Dorset. In a Land Rover. With a trailer behind him, bearing his day boat. A three day trip. My sister never complained (I didn't hear her, anyway). And he was quite resigned when we had six days in succession with never a breath of wind. Still, the boat looked nice, reflected in the still water of the sea loch.

I went up a hill called the Cobbler, accompanied by various startled greetings from walkers I met. I remember hearing 'You're moving fast' (didn't hear any more of that one, obviously), 'Are you in training for something?' and 'Would you mind carrying me down?' – this from a 25 year old with a large rucsack. As there was a Munro next to the Cobbler, I did that too.

We went to Iona, and then we saw Sea Eagles. And Golden Eagles. And other birds too numerous to mention. And I had a run on the tourist tracks through a forest – then tried my own routes. Which took rather longer.

And all the while I was calling the Highland Games number. A bit complicated – mobiles didn't work where we were. One day I drove 16 miles just to hear the lady.

So I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that the rellies thought it might be a really significant race. And eventually I did get through – on the Friday. To hear that the race started at 3 p.m. – good – plenty of time to get there then. And she wasn't sure how long it was – maybe 5 miles? And how much of a climb? 'Oh I don't know, perhaps up from 300 feet to 1000 feet'. So I thanked her, and the next day I had my pre race breakfast, muesli and toast. And then more toast for my elevenses. And when it got to 10 a.m. I said my good byes and thank yous and set off. And I got to Aberfeldy at 1.30 p.m. I'd had my hair cut on the way – that took a while.

It's not a big town and it advertises itself as Scotland's first Fair Trade town. So I soon found the Games ground, and then I found the car park and paid the Boy Scouts £1. And by now I hadn't much more than an hour to spare so I

hurried to the entrance and paid for my ticket. And asked whether that included the race entry. The lady thought for a bit and concluded it most likely did. Where to register? I should go to the secretary's tent on the far side of the ground.

That took me past the cows and through all the horses, and I found the secretary, in his shed. Certainly, I could still enter the race. I just needed to speak to the fellow with the microphone.

I wasn't too sure about this, not liking to interrupt the flow of information (imagine getting through to the announcer at Burnsall) and hesitant about crossing the ropes and walking to the middle of the ring, but there you go. Through the rope. To the centre, ask the man; and I was given a blank sheet of paper. To write my name on. And anything else I thought they might like to know about me. So I wrote down my club, my address, and my vet category. And was told that was it. No mention of a race number. Yes – they would start at about 3 o'clock, right there in the ring, there was plenty of time 'That's more than an hour off, it'll nearly be tomorrow'. Banks of portable toilets, so that's O.K., then back to the car park and get changed. A bit of a run round the car park. Back to the ground. Back to the toilets. Almost three o'clock – best get to the start.

Back into the ring. A dozen men, one woman, me. 'We'll give you the briefing in a minute'. Pipers still playing, people dancing, hammers being thrown. Why do they go the right way, away from the crowd? How much is their insurance? When I comment that this is a small field for a fell race, the reply is 'This is pretty good, some years there are only six'. Then another chap appears. And a round stone about 3 feet across. We move out of the way – he picks up the stone, carries it about 60 feet before he leaves go. And returns with his feet intact. Then he lines up to join us for the race.

At last we're off. One circuit of the ground, the spectators applauding all the way. Out onto the road, over the river, overtake one (the stone carrier), up the wood, overtake another, along a wall, out into the open and through several fields to the accompaniment of stampeding fence breaking cows, down a track, through the golf course, lose a place, back over the bridge and onto the ground. Another circuit, desperately trying to catch up again, further sustained applause, but no success. And they record your time, then ask your name & write it down. Approximately, in my case.

And I wasn't last – winner 28 mins 28 sec, 2nd 31 something, me 39 minutes 57 seconds. I was really pleased. But no prizes, and no points.

While we'd been away, lots more people had carried the stone. Many of them a lot further. I did consider it. But no more.

And – no, it isn't such a very popular race.

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