

The Hill Race

There was less than an hour to go before the start. I could already picture the scene. I cruised down the last steep hill before the games field having just passed the race favorite, his ageing knees affecting his descending prowess. I powered onto the field to tumultuous applause. The crowds, gathered to ogle the heavy sports of the Highland Games, cheered as I sprinted the last 100 metres, the first home of the hardy hillrunners who'd entered the Hill Race. And not just any old hill race; this was none other than the 2.5 mile Killin International Highland Games Hill Race.

Held on a Wednesday afternoon at the start of August every year, it attracts some of the most respected international 'heavies' of the Highland Games circuit. This year was no exception. There were competitors from the US, New Zealand, Poland, Australia, England and Scotland. One of them claimed to be the ex-World's Strongest Man. Their competition for the title of Games Champion involved throwing ridiculously large stones and hammers across the field and tossing cabers the like of which would give most telegraph poles an inferiority complex. These guys were by no means your stereotype athletes. Built like the proverbial brick outhouse their Hagrid like bodies bulged under 'traditional' highland shirts whose lurid graphics extolled the virtues of Famous Grouse and Irn Bru. Just one of their kilts would provide several pairs of tartan curtains for a large lounge window.

I anticipated the fiercely competitive hill race that would be an integral part of the grand occasion. I scanned the crowd for familiar faces, the fast boys, the stalwarts, the hard men of the hill running scene. I was perturbed by their absence. The spectators were predominantly your local highland games types, tourists and a smattering of larger than life Americans. I sauntered over to the small registration tent expecting the usual form filling, registration team and number issue. "You doin' the hill race?" the young girl asked.

"Yes", I replied, expanding my chest and tightening the abs.

"Just fill in your name and address then", she pointed at a clipboard on the table. I expected to see a long list of entrants but was amazed to see only four other names on the sheet.

"Where's the start?" I asked.

"I don't know," the girl replied, "I'm sure he'll announce it." Quarter of an hour later I realized I'd forgotten to get a race number. Back at the tent the race organiser welcomed me to the games. I explained my lack of number.

"Don't worry laddie", he assured me, "we don't need numbers, I'll know all yer names." Amazed at his powers of recall I asked whether the route was flagged. "Och no, ye just run up that hill over there", he pointed, "just follow the path... and there's a wee laddie at the top who'll point you back down again."

"Are you expecting a good turn out?"

"Och aye, I think there'll be at least seven or eight of you."

At 2:45pm, with less than an hour to go, there were still only five of us entered and, hard to believe I know, I was the second youngest in the field. My opposition consisted of a 60 year old Scottish gentlemen, a lithe looking lady in her fifties, another chap whose physique resembled that of Jos Naylor and a young 17 year old lad. My mind raced, so to speak. There's not many 60 year olds who can take me on a steep downhill...and that Jos lookalike must have dodgy knees...and I'm not going to be beaten by a lady no matter how fit she looks. And the young boy? A few too many McDonalds I surmised from his slightly pasty appearance. Maybe I could win?

It's strange how that weird mix of hope, competitive nature and downright delusion can combine to fire one's imagination. I was getting nervous. "I'd better change and warm up", I said to Mandy. Sporting my best Tod Harriers vest I walked towards the hill. It was then that I spotted another runner. The wiry chap with a thick mane of curly hair, wearing the dark blue vest of Ochil Hillrunners, bid me good day.

"I see it's a top class field", he commented.

"Is it?"

"Aye, Colin Donnelly and a good few of his friends from Lochaber are here." He pointed up the hill. Ambition plummeted as I spied half a dozen athletic types warming up, nonchalantly cruising up and down a gradient that I'd struggle to walk up. "And there's a couple of us here from Ochil." My hopes hit rock bottom when he added, "It's the best line up for years, there's two ex-Scottish champions, and two ex-British champions in the starting line-up." I was beginning to worry that I might be last. "Jos" was looking even leaner and meaner than the great man himself, the lady probably holds numerous hill running records and the young boy was, no doubt, the local college record holder. I might just hold off the older gentleman, I hoped.

It was uplifting to see that the canny highlanders completely ignore any Scottish Athletics "how to start a hill race" rules and regulations. The race organiser called the 17 starters to the line. "Right lads and lasses, it's good to see so many runners here. I hope you all have a good race...you shouldn't get lost, just run up and down that hill over there. Now I've managed to leave my stopwatch at home so ye'll have to time yourselves...so, watches ready... OK" We waited... "Well, off you go then!...". We raced down the field to a loud cheer from the crowd. The first 100 metres was flat. The next mile and a quarter was ridiculously steep and the runners were soon strung out with me near the back. "Jos" had disappeared vertically upwards, the young boy was a dot in the distance and, with me reduced to walking, the old chap was well up the hill and still running. It was the toughest short climb I've done in years. My hands on knees persistence pulled a few places back by the summit, and I gained a few more on the mad hurtle back down, including, to my great relief, the oldest and youngest competitors. I entered the field to applause, albeit slightly less tumultuous than that in my daydream, but welcome nonetheless. I wasn't last (I was in fact 9th). and can at least now claim that I was once in the top 10 in an international hill race. Fame indeed.

We all received a goody bag as we finished. I'm now the proud owner of a Killin International Highland Games Hill Race T-shirt. I smiled as I recalled the race. The minimalist approach was a breath of fresh air. It must have been how most hill and fell races used to be before interference by athletics bodies and the like. I wonder if all the Highland Games races are like that. I'm going to have to find out. And you never know, I might be in with a chance if only two or three turn up!

Phil Hodgson