

**“One more spoonful of rice pudding and I’ll be home”**

## **West Highland Way 2015**

It has perhaps been too perfect a build up. Solid performances in earlier races, and no injuries. After a recce weekend on the route in May when I ran 57 miles over two days I felt ready.

I wasn't to know that later that night I would spend it throwing up having picked up some sort of viral thing that knocked me out for a week, followed by a heavy fall and a trip to A & E in final 100m of a Park Run!

But I didn't let it get to me too much. Running a race like this is all about slow and steady training over several months, not the last 3-4 weeks. So as I was weighed in (yeah think boxing match, Iron Tudds Tyson) and collected my timing device late Friday night I thought my A list target of sub 20 hours was definitely possible.

The nerves were palpable as we all stood by the pedestrian tunnel in Milngavie on the outskirts of Glasgow at midnight to listen to the race briefing. The Barber brothers looked more focused than me, all prepared for the military operation aka as crewing en route. As we lined up on the start it was hard not to admire the elite on the front row, especially the record holder, Paul Giblin. He looked sinewy as ever and his star turn late entry was fresh from his Ultra running exploits for the UK team. His presence was a godsend as will become clear later.

Then we were off, running briefly through the town at 1am headtorches blazing, the crowd giving us the love. My mantra kicked in for the first few miles “slow down, slow down”. In my first 100 miler I had gone off far too fast, and was determined not to get giddy this time, a definite risk as this was a runnable section.

I remembered that the sun should start to rise from 3.28am, and a few minutes before something quite magical happened. The moorland burst into song as the dawn chorus played out all around us. From the calm of just the sound of feet on trails to the cacophony of sound. It was an ornithological equivalent of a Motorhead gig, but more tuneful!

From that point, we started to gradually descend to Balmaha, a twisty wonderful route down in the strengthening light. Nick was there in midge headgear ready to dispense various goodies, and despite running steady I was up on target and feeling fine.

Eventually Loch Lomond came into view, the largest stretch of inland water in Great Britain. Elise in her wise prep talk has warned me about the rough terrain and the endlessness of it. Initially the first few miles weren't too bad, but eventually the rocky, uneven surface does wear you down and that water looks like it will never end! I was pleased to finally reach Beinglas Farm, marking 40 miles in and not far from halfway. Rice pudding definitely featured at this checkpoint.

The next stretch is perhaps the most scenic and as you pass Tyndrum towards the Bridge of Orchy the beauty of the surroundings boosts you. This is proper highlands, epic mountains, and pure magnificence. I tore down the road into the Bridge of Orchy checkpoint still up on schedule and still feeling human which was pleasing given I was 60 miles in.

Boost your love and hope reserves during that stage. If this race was a drama, the next episode would be the one when it all gets messy. Rannoch Moor, oh Rannoch Moor! Again the sage Elise had warned me. I had recced this, but its something else to run across it late afternoon after you have been running since 1am.

Robert MacFarlane in "The Wild Places" describes how people have been lost on the moor in winter and lost their minds, tortured by the unending similarity of the surroundings and no sense of direction. It was ten miles marred by little sense of progress and that elusive checkpoint at Glencoe felt like it would never come.

Nick told me afterwards I was grey at I staggered in, and knew I didn't look good as the marshal asked if I was ok. I stuttered that I was a disgrace to ultra running, to Todmorden Harriers, to my mother who never should have given birth to me, I meant it! But Nick calmly pointed out I was still on schedule and so I rested for a bit, recovered and headed off to the Devil's Staircase. There wasn't much movement in terms of places by this stage but I did pass another runner and somehow realised I may now have been through my low point.

Robbie Britton say you will have low points, embrace them, live with them, it will get better. And it did. I saw the last main checkpoint Kinlockleven a few miles before I got to it. At this point Richard, Nick's brother, was going to run the last 14 miles with me. This could only happen if I was more than 4 hours behind the

leader. Thankfully Paul Giblin was tearing up the trail on the way to beating his course record by six minutes, and two and a half hours ahead of 2<sup>nd</sup> place. Without him I would have had to run on my own. The clock was speaking to me, rest had to be brief, I left the checkpoint just a minute ahead of schedule for a sub 20 hour finish.

We headed for the big climb I had been warned about, but it felt so good to be with another runner it didn't seem to matter. Richard was a star, tolerating my torrent of expletives as the hills continued, not big but relentless and I was tired by now. Suddenly the last hill was reached and the wide track emerged which would take you downhill to Fort William. I knew I had 3 miles to go at that point and the sub 20 hours looked on.

I was giddy now, somehow speeding up to just over 6 minute miles and with people shouting you are nearly there! Then we were in town, and I saw a runner ahead, he finished 20 seconds ahead of me but had left the last checkpoint 22 minutes before. This last few miles was satisfying and testament to Richard's support. Nick appeared on the road as the finish line was in sight, I punched the air and was done in 19 hours 40 minutes at 8.40pm, still in the light. I was weighed and was 3.5kg lighter than when I started!

That cup of hot sweet tea felt like the most wonderful thing ever. I was now officially part of the West Highland Way Race family, still less than 1000 that have completed the race. We camped that night, and after a cool windy but dry day I thought of those still out there as the rain pounded down overnight.

We headed to the presentation the next morning just after 11am and watched the last finishers coming in, who deserve total respect, two nights out there gulp. The presentation was a moving experience and my goblet is a proud possession. This really is a special event, on a route that a lot of people have walked so it still causes lots of conversations not only with runners.

Finally, it's important to say that three of us completed it, not just me. Nick and Richard were amazing and I am in their debt, crewing something like this is hard work, I think we were all part of a weekend we will never forget.

Robin Tuddenham