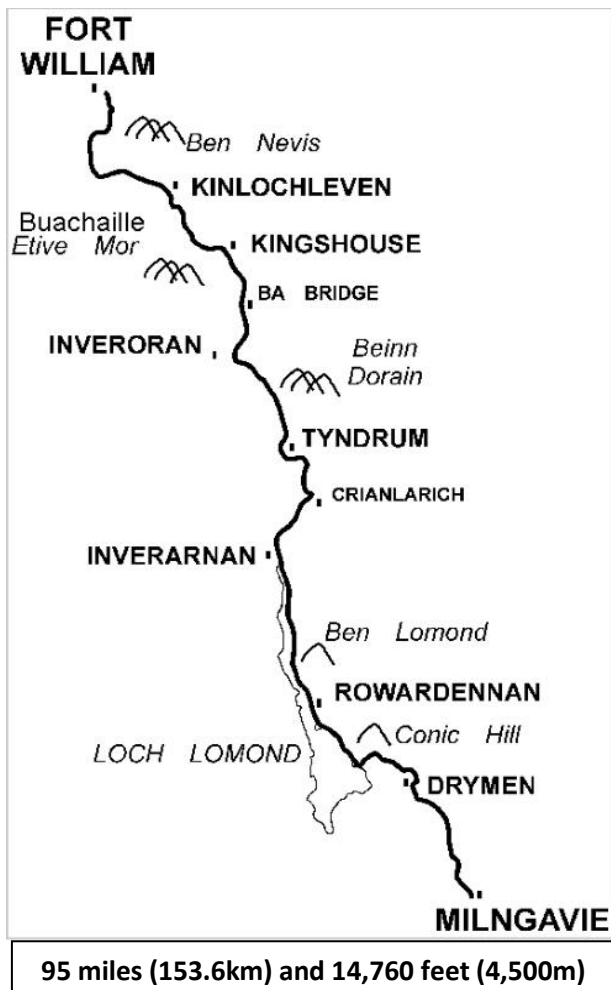


2015 West Highland Way Race Report (Allan Grant)

'A TALE OF TWO RACES'



My recollections begin 5 days before as I wanted to record some of my thoughts before things get intense! Training mileage was similar to 2014 where over approx 22 weeks I've logged about 850 miles. Modest by most ultra runners standards but find any commitment to more than this encroaches on work-life balance or my body rebels or a bit of both. My first 3 WHW Race years (2011-13) I did over 1100 miles over same period. However each year I have got faster so mileage is not everything and, in fact, am wondering if there might have been an element of over training in my first few years of preparing for this event. I do note that though mileage these past 2 years has been less I have consciously focussed on longer runs being tougher in terms of terrain and ascent/descent. Hopefully has helped a bit with quality rather than just miles for the sake of it.

My last and biggest week of training did not work out as came down with a flu like bug which floored me for 3 days and left me weak for about 2 weeks afterward so my taper has been 4 weeks instead of 3. Good or bad? Certainly my emphasis has been to get to the start as well rested as I can be.

Feel a little less intimidated approaching the race this year. This is something I wanted to do and each year have put a lot of effort into preparing for this. There were some dark days where body and mind were rebelling but have got through them. It is inevitable if you give almost 6 months of year to training that other things in work and life can affect and influence how you feel/ think about what you are doing. It is after all a hobby!

Every year I have struggled with nutrition during the race and each year I try to change my diet a bit but to no great effect. One common factor is planning to eat far more than I actually do. I feel I may be eating more than is helpful, hence the upset stomach and being sick the last 2 years. Really don't know what the underlying reasons are. If you read on you'll see later I still have problems in this area!

As in past years the final days before event I find whatever I do my mind is still drawn to the task ahead. Whatever the 'distraction', be it work or normal daily routines everything seems subservient to the



Where did I put the kitchen sink?

mind's priming for the task ahead. Despite this being my fifth time previous experience seems to lead to caution rather than complacency in terms of preparation and both mind and body know it! Am I rested? Not to get flustered over small things. Be decisive about my race plan (food, drink, target times). Ultimately the critical resources for the challenge are a pair of legs (and feet, where the rubber meets the road!) and to be mentally and spiritually prepared to endure for many hours whatever the issues are or become during the journey. Once again I got my request for race number 121. As the ancient Israelites ascended on pilgrimage to Jerusalem Psalm 121 has such a steadying influence to draw on the Creator's strength and help when your own is at an end. He will keep our feet from stumbling during the rigours of the day (the sun) or the night (moon) and will be ever awake and watchful over us all.

I was blessed once again with a great support crew. Gordon McNeish for the first time provided support during the first half of race to Auchtertyre. It is a somewhat lonely task but critical for me to see a friendly face as the first half is certainly more lonely from the runner's perspective. Angus McKee (driver) and Don Mellor and Dougie Robertson were my support during the 2nd half with Don and Dougie providing running support. They were all experienced and I guess have come to understand something of my ways. We had met to discuss things a few weeks before and all seemed to highlight how I went into a 'bubble' in the later stages where I became a bit quiet and withdrawn. This has been a common theme and whether it's good or bad sometimes you think you are so fragile the only thing that protects you is that 'bubble'. Anyhow I am aware of this and maybe that helps. Having such a good support team also affords opportunity to get to know one another in unusual circumstances. Whether in conversation or 'suffering together in silence' it is all true companionship. Deeply grateful for the help of these men as it really is a team effort to get me to Fort William. They all have their own stories and perspectives on this epic journey. Special mention must be given to Elisabeth as the veteran of all 5 of these races who motivates and encourages me for weeks prior to the event each year. As usual after seeing me off in Milngavie she would try and get some sleep at home the first night and then travel up by car and see me along with crew in Glencoe, Kinlochleven and at the end.

And so to the day before. As previously I resolved to stay off my feet most of the day and had taken the day off. In reality I got no sleep during day but did spend some time lying down. Much of the day I was fretting about what I should or shouldn't take. There always seems to be only so much you can do in advance and as the time draws nearer the 'to do' list seems to get added to.



Gordon, Dougie, Don & Angus –a happy crew!

tales of Narnia and the Hobbit. Enough of the fairy tales.

At 10:20pm on the Friday 19th June I met with Gordon and put the food and gear in his car and after registration and weigh in at St. Joseph's RC church went to Gordon and Kirsteen Dutton's home which is literally next door. Each and every year they have faithfully provided a nice haven of rest in that hiatus between registration and the start. Thanks again! I can also meet with the crew and any well-wishers. So much better than battling midges in a car. There is a certain tension in the air, at least from my perspective. We were about to embark on an adventure. Dougie mentioned that he felt time was standing still as the wall clock had stopped and curiously got me thinking of the epic

Race tactics this year was to beat last year's 28:02:58 and had set myself probably ambitious target times for a 27 hour race. However the best laid plans.... see later! Last year I had made a huge improvement over 2013

but maybe thinking I could lop off another hour was unrealistic. However I need targets – it is a race! Food was an enigma as never know what I'll like or find palatable. However one part of the strategy was to eat less than previously.

Pre-race brief 12:30am and before I knew it 187 of us were off at 1am through the railway underpass. I felt good and was confidently visualising how the race would go. Weather was cool and pleasant. Somewhat comical moment after about 700m when a crowd of us ran 100m past a turn off in the woods before we realised we were on the wrong path! All we like sheep.

Brief moment seeing Gordon at Beech Tree Inn (12 km), one minute behind target time so felt good. At Drymen (20Km) I again met Gordon and was I think about 5 mins behind so was slipping a bit. However didn't let that worry me as was determined to enjoy the time. I did not want obsession with times to spoil this.

The first major effort of the race is up Conic Hill and down to Balmaha. My temptation is to take this too aggressively as I am still feeling relatively strong and fatigue is not an issue. As I ascended I began to experience nausea which was not a good sign so early on. I had only had a home made nut/seed cake and a few nibbles since the start.

I think in each WHW Race I have come to a point where the temptation to give up has been strong. It's usually in the earlier stages when some problem occurs and the brain rebels against having to cope with the prospect of 20 or more hours of discomfort, movement and effort. None was stronger than that ascent of Conic hill whilst feeling sick. I remember having a very negative conversation with myself and even considered phoning Elisabeth to suggest I chuck it in and save support crew the effort. I'd done this 4 times before so didn't need to prove to myself I could do it. However, one thing stopped me. Maybe I would not do this race again. Did I want to think of my last such race as one that I quitted? That didn't feel right. I had to recalibrate and realise that the target times I had set were not going to be achievable but I could set my heart on finishing. That is really what it is about. The nausea I guessed would be with me for rest of race and just have to live with it. Perspective was also gained as I passed Chris Moon, an ex-army officer, who had lost a leg and an arm to a landmine. I remember him taking part in the race a few years before and didn't make it. No words were exchanged, the clicking of his prostheses was inspirational enough. This year it was great to hear he made it.

Arrived Balmaha (31.5km) to meet an unrecognisable Gordon clad in midge protection gear. I did not of course relay to him my recent inner thoughts. Strangely despite my struggles I was only 2 mins behind my target at that point so my speed was fine. I did manage to take on board a little tea and yoghurt/muesli which had been in my plan. I was also taking in fluids as planned.

And so on to the long, undulating east side of Loch Lomond. Beautiful at any time but it seemed more so in the peace of the early morning. Birdsong always lifts spirits, not least after the dark of night. Arriving in Rowardennan (44km) I again met Gordon and bravely went for the chicken soup which was in my plan. I managed a little. Usually I would not eat soup at 7am so maybe this nausea is just my stomach saying *'this is not normal'*.

Departing Rowardennan is the loneliest stretch of the route as not only are you on your own but you are so for a long time. Support do not meet you at Inversnaid and the next time I would be seeing Gordon would be at Bein Glas, over 4 hours away. I had a drop bag at Inversnaid and there was also water supplied so was ok for food. At Inversnaid (55km) I took on a little food but the thought of eating anything was making things worse. Instead I concentrated on fluids which are absolutely critical. Try and take on fizzy drinks. The high sugar content might give me needed energy and the fizz hides the sweet taste which I would revolt against. The terrain over the next section is particularly challenging after Inversnaid. It includes 4km of clambering over large rocks with hands and feet followed by a long ascent to Bein Glas. I have never been realistic on time here, persistently thinking I can do better than I do.

At Bein Glas (65km) I met Gordon which would be for the last time. After seeing me he was going to meet up with 2nd stage support in Crianlarich and transfer gear and food and head home for a well earned rest. Thanks Gordon.

The 15km section to Auchtertyre is a bit gentler terrain wise but fatigue is definitely setting in. So far have not mentioned much of fellow runners. I was meeting individuals and having brief chats but the reality is that with only 187 runners over 95 miles the field gets more and more stretched as time goes on with runners further apart from each other. Curiously though you can bunch up unexpectedly only then to mysteriously disperse. Once I caught up with one young man, a forlorn figure who had resorted to walking. Upon asking how he was doing I realised he was having one of these really hard times mentally as he said he was OK physically. Mindful of how I'd felt some hours before I tried to encourage but not sure it helped. Hope he made it.

Auchtertyre (80km) and the welcome faces of Don, Dougie and Angus to meet me. Don had ran out to meet me and find out my requirements. A clothes change which was easy to contemplate and would be refreshing. Food was another issue as I had lost all interest. However thought I should still eat more chicken soup and ended up promptly being sick. However felt the better for it. The experience made me even more wary of food. As far as timing went I was 13 mins behind my original schedule so was actually doing a lot better than anticipated. I was weighed there and had just under 4% weight loss since the start, significant but not critical.

I have titled this account '*A Tale Of Two Races*' because not only does Auchtertyre mark the halfway point but it also is when I will have either Don or Dougie as running companions for the rest of the journey. The second half was more challenging physically dealing with fatigue but on other hand was more sociable. The first half I found was more of an internal and solitary experience.

And so it was off with Don for the stretch to Bridge of Orchy. I did manage a plain vanilla ice cream as we passed through Tyndrum as curiously it was the only food in my imagination I could stomach. I also curiously began to crave strawberries but decided that would be presumptuous to ask support to source that.

Upon arrival in Bridge of Orchy (95km) what should Angus have on offer but strawberries (!). Before you call I will answer! Most other things on the menu I had no interest in but decided to not fret at the prospect of running the next 57 or so km with little or no calorie intake. Undeniably had I managed to ingest more food I would have run better but if needs must you can travel a long way with no food. Timing wise I had now slipped to 1 hr 21 min behind my initial 27 hour target. Even though I knew I would not achieve this it was somehow helpful to keep track of where I was in relation to original plans. I now left B of O with a very fresh looking Dougie as my companion along the way to Glencoe. We were told to have full waterproof clothing with us but turned out was not needed on this section.

On the way from B of O to Glencoe you traverse through the beautiful, isolated hamlet of Inveroran. However before that there is a milestone, the 100km mark where traditionally a Murdo McEwen greets every runner on 'jelly baby' hill with a jelly baby! He did not disappoint this year. The view descending into Inveroran is lovely and did not disappoint. Passing through a gentle glade with tents and happy campers spoke of a more tranquil approach to the outdoors than I was currently committed to. I was a little envious of their relaxed taking in of the sunshine! Then on to the long stretch at Rannoch Moor where the path stretches out to the horizon. At this stage of the journey I still have a long way to go and weariness becomes a constant companion. The big sky views on the moor seem to be reminding you of how far you still have to go! Concentrate on the here and now instead. No matter how long the distance if you keep moving your feet time passes and you arrive. Also had some good conversation with Dougie as well as some genial chats from the occasional appearance of fellow runners and their support.

A few km before Glencoe (114km) Dougie went ahead to greet the rest of the crew and prepare for my arrival. As I approached the ski centre car park it was a welcome sight to see Elisabeth. There was the usual kind

proffering of food by crew and my less than enthusiastic responses. However I did decide on a hamburger Angus was bravely cooking. Bad idea as it was only ingested for minutes when it came back up. Ah well at least I felt better! Clothing-wise previous years experience told me I really had to have plenty clothing as the weather can change dramatically and quickly in the mountains around Glencoe so had several layers on. When very tired I now see warmth is absolutely critical. And so I left with Don who had now done this stretch previously with me several times at various times of day. It was good to have his knowledge of my previous experiences in entering a 2nd night running. These have included hallucinations, extreme dizziness and such tiredness that one year I desperately wanted to lie down in a torrential stream to rest. At such times I valued his handling of my losing touch with reality and so it was good for him once again to share this stage of the journey. I understand the tales of people wanting to sleep in the snow. When feeling extremely chilled and tired it is the fatigue which is the more powerful.

At least I was fast enough to go up the devil's staircase in daylight which made things easier and managed to get over the top and start descent into Kinlochleven (KLL) before using headtorches. Once again there was dizziness and started to see a few things in the rocks that really weren't there but not as much as previous years. KLL (129km) is the last checkpoint and is a defining moment of the race. I have never entertained the distance to the end until this point. I find memories of the sports centre where the checkpoint is a bit grim as the midges seem to always be inside the building and I'm usually not in a good state physically. Weighed again and was about 1kg up on previous weighing. Not really eating anything I must be retaining fluid judging by my puffy fingers but was within limits. Forced down a cup of tea, a segment of orange and a few grapes. That would have to do for this final 24 km stretch. This time both Dougie and Don would accompany me and after goodbyes to Elisabeth and Angus we were off on the climb out of KLL up to the Lairig Mor. Conversation was little on the ascent as we expended effort on climbing. However once we were on easier ground Dougie and Don engaged in the finer points of English literature. I found it very interesting but my comments were few. Happy to engage my mind away from the torrential rain but felt expending too much energy on speaking would have used up precious physical energy. Thanks guys.

Another expected tradition was to meet with the faithful volunteers who man the Wilderness Response team and usually offer drink and refreshment lit up with Chinese lanterns. Of course as a rescue service that is not their main purpose and it seemed they were responding to some need as their hospitality place looked abandoned in a hurry. We managed to grab some fizzy drink that was lying around which was refreshing.

By and by we came to Lundavra, where the traditional bonfire was a welcome beacon and warming sign that this long odyssey was in the final stages. However, it's not a place to stay in heavy rain in the middle of the night. Better to press on as there was only 11.2 km to go! Angus had kindly driven to meet us but after a brief greeting none of us felt like lingering. Sorry Angus, it was good of you to be there. I also felt sorry though for the valiant fellow keeping the bonfire going in these conditions.

Off we went and suddenly there seemed to be several more groups of runners and supporters, another bunching up. We passed two women who did not have the right clothing for the conditions. Maybe they didn't know just how cold midsummer could be in Scotland! Upon enquiring of their condition they said they were feeling hypothermic. Between Dougie giving his down jacket and my giving a long sleeved top it helped them keep moving. We at least know they made it as retrieved the clothes at the race 'lost and found' in Fort William.

The sky was now lightening and we arrived at the forestry fire road which descends for several km into Fort W. I texted to let Elisabeth and Angus know that we were now in Glen Nevis. At last Braveheart car park loomed into sight, the first sign of entering the town itself and Elisabeth was there. Here we go again, that last push and encouragement to press on with that last bit of effort, forgetting what had lain behind. Don, Dougie & Angus were also there on this last mile, definitely the longest. And there I was, at the leisure centre clocking in

at 29:01:58 (6:01am) and being garlanded in traditional Swedish style by Elisabeth. Just under an hour slower than last year but plenty pleased, considering. 112th out of 155 finishers.

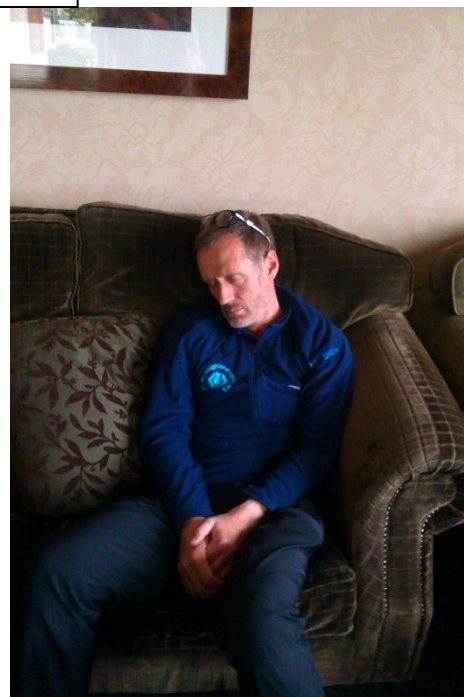


Wonder how much weight I lost?



Fifth Crystal Goblet!

After some very welcome showers we all went to the Alexandra hotel for a cooked breakfast. My appetite was slowly returning! Just as inviting was for all of us to slumber in the hotel lounge afterwards before going to the prize giving in the Nevis centre. As is tradition each finishers was publicly awarded their goblets. Once again Paul Giblin for the 3rd year in a row broke his own record in a surreal 14 hours 14 mins. To put that into perspective, I was approaching Tyndrum and he was in Fort William! Second place was 2 hours 12 mins behind so he is in a category of his own.



Post-breakfast nap

Thanks again to Don, Dougie, Angus, Gordon and Elisabeth for helping me get there in one piece.

Allan Grant

Postscript

In previous years I have ran this race in aid of Starfish Asia. As Elisabeth recently raised a lot of money for them I did not want to raise funds from friends/ family once again so soon after. However if you wish to you can donate online at <http://starfishasia.com/> and mention it was for my running the West Highland Way Race (or send cheque ('Starfish Asia') to Starfish Asia, 32 Beck Lane, Beckenham, Kent BR3 4RE, England). Starfish Asia are a UK charity committed to bringing new hope to the lives of the desperately poor, especially in the marginalized Christian community in Pakistan. Pakistani Christians are mostly poor and have little access to public education or justice. They need our help!