

2016 HOKA HIGHLAND FLING

(Milngavie – Tyndrum)

As I approached my 13th official ultra preparation for mind and body followed a usual pattern of increasing excitement mixed with nerves body in its own marvellous way signalling that a physically challenging period was coming up. Training had not gone so well having been dogged by 2 colds in a row and persistent cough for several weeks. I have a separate post on my 'training and lifestyle makeover' of recent months which has hugely influenced my approach to this race and would be a test.

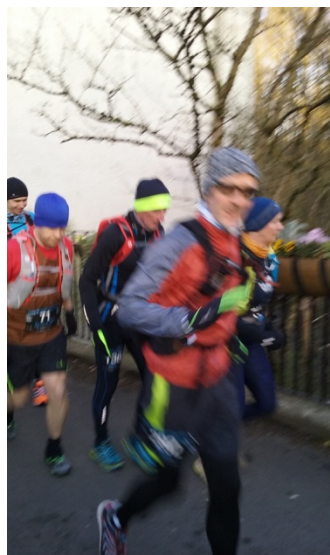
A rather embarrassing caveat on my pre-race prep. I got the start date wrong by a week having thought since last November that the race was on 23rd April! I had faithfully followed all the instructions but somehow missed the headline date on all communications! It was not till late Thursday evening of Thursday 21st when I had sorted, packed and prepared all I thought I would need that I discovered it was to be a week Saturday! Felt a real clown.

So the day came and on 30th April with my race no. 292 I was on start line at 6am with about 750 other solo runners on a journey to Tyndrum. I was wearing my HR monitor as I knew that I can easily get carried away with so any other runners and just charge off. I was going to run as aerobically as I could from the start, allowing about 15-20 heartbeats above my normal training pace of 126bpm.

Nutrition wise I was going to try a new food scheme. This was most probably a mistake. Too much protein and fat and too little fast acting carbs. This no doubt contributed to my problems later.



START AND SETTING OFF



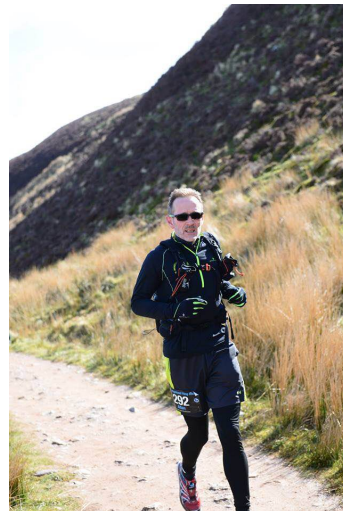
That said the first part of my race went really well and went through Drymen (20km) and Balmaha (31.5km) more refreshed than I have ever been with breathing and HR under control. I was a bit slower but not significantly and felt I was on course to do a 'slow and steady' trip and be strong throughout. I nurtured thoughts that I could maybe achieve my 12 hour finish aim. How wrong could I be! Endurance races are all about managing and even changing expectations and so it proved to be. More of that later.



APPROACHING BEECH TREE INN



*CONIC HILL –
FEELING GOOD*



This state of relevant well being continued until some point between Rowardennan (44km) and Inversnaid (55km). At that point after about 6-7 hours running I had a sudden loss of energy and feeling of deep fatigue more pronounced than I ever remember coupled with a whole body feeling of muscle soreness. I also began to feel nauseated which was a familiar pattern so my food changes didn't seem to have made a difference. I was now battling with an energy deficiency and an inability to refuel and a flood of discouraging thoughts.

Got to Inversnaid with little appetite for any foods or the mountain of leftovers others hadn't wanted from their own drop bags. Pressed on and after an hour I had to just stop and rest. Muscle cramps in both legs were also appearing. I was now progressing v slowly and losing time at checkpoints. If you think this accumulation of adverse experiences was affecting my mood you were right! For the first time in any ultra I phoned Elisabeth to say that I thought I should quit at the penultimate checkpoint, Bein Glas. It would be a major effort just to get there in my condition and think of pressing on with a further 3-4 hours of what would be a forced and painful march overwhelmed me. Elisabeth who probably understands me more than I do wisely said I didn't need to make that decision until I actually got to Bein Glas but she would come to get me if need be. Nothing changed but agreed not to dwell on any final

decision until getting to Bein Glas. During this process I was accompanied by another struggling runner who had firmly decided to give up and had called his girlfriend to pick him up. Actually didn't encourage me in my state as he seemed in better condition than me but you never know what is going on in one's mind.

I started to pray that unless I had some encouragement in Bein Glas that would be the decider. With little faith I was looking for a sign. I had to get energy from somewhere. Eventually the checkpoint loomed and was greeted by a cheery marshall proffering a cup of coke. Was this a sign! It was the one and only thing my body could ingest with gusto. Whatever my sugar lowering and fat burning training methods my body was craving sugar and it knew it. I devoured 4 cups of that golden syrup. I shared with this same fellow who was also an experienced endurance runner and he helpfully (NOT!) said he had DNFed (Did Not Finish) at Bein Glas last year and there was no shame. I told him I had never DNFed and asked if he thought I would beat the race timing and he reckoned that a 3-4 hour forced march could do it. Suddenly a somewhat dim light came on that what was an insurmountable problem of pain and weariness could be changed into a challenge. No more was it a 12 hour race. The challenge was to finish under 15 hours and it was going to be a big one. Hardly a performance achievement but in terms of effort it would be something. Changing expectations had turned a wearying, sickening prospect into a goal gave me a little spring in my step as I proceeded on and committed to new goals. Spoke with Elisabeth to tell her to drive to Tyndrum. Unbeknown to me she had actually arrived at Bein Glas car park just after I had marched on.

Good advice says that in every adversity to be solution focussed and not dwell on the actual experience. If I could get no nourishment or energy from food at least I could take some refreshment from refreshing, icy, rushing stream water over my head and dwell blissfully on a post race hot shower. Cold comfort I can hear you say! I also began to think of the traditional post- race beer with its nourishing carbs, fizziness and general satisfying satiety. It seemed to be the only food thought that didn't make me feel sick. A funny thing as I drink little beer and certainly not on its own. Sometimes I think the body knows what is best!?

I was now in a position to sometimes encourage others I met as we were all battling our various problems at this the very tail of the race. It was not probably where any of us expected to be at the beginning of the day.

Due to my state Elisabeth wanted me to call every hour or so to relate progress and eventually we agreed she would walk to meet me from the finish. What a welcome sight to see her greeting me in Tyndrum woods to say there was about about a mile to go and she had taken 20 mins at a brisk walk. I had 30 mins to beat 15 hours so the pressure was still on. Ah nothing like a timing gate to give you that last reserve of energy! And so the longed for experience came at 14:44:35 after what must be the longest red carpet. Close one with 15 mins left but job done!

Huge thanks to Johnny (aka) Fling for putting on another superb race along with his 100+ dedicated volunteers serving us all along the way. Also grateful for the generosity of several professional photographers (Graeme Hewitson & team, Patricia Carvalho & several others) who provided some 'action' pics on route. Elisabeth's key role in my keeping going has almost definitely meant I finished as well as her other support throughout the day, thank you.



*A LONG RED CARPET
BUT NOT 53 MILES!*



The man from Skye, Donnie Campbell, broke the course record with an amazing 6:51:06. You can see an inspiring short video on Facebook of the front runners as they battled it out during what for them was a short day! Link is

<https://www.facebook.com/197753333632134/videos/1097565823650876/>