

THE HOKA HIGHLAND FLING – 19 MAY 2013

I feel compelled to write this report as feel there are lessons I need to learn from this experience which will easily be lost to my memory otherwise. So it is written primarily as a note to myself and it may be that others might find something of interest herein. It also has more reflections than previous reports.

This was my 4th Fling, the 85 km from Mingavie in Glasgow to the West Highland village of Tyndrum, the first half of the classic West Highland Way. It was also the 3rd anniversary into the minority sport of ultra running and my first Fling was my introduction to that. The last 2 years it has served as a key test in my training to do the full West Highland Way Race in June and it serves the same purpose here.

However to call it a training run does not do it justice in that running for 85km is a very long way and anything can happen and I knew that it had to be treated with utmost respect. Each time has been hard and each time there have been experiences of self doubt.

In the days prior I felt that I had prepared as best I could. This year I have found that I need more rest in the training period. Whether it's just my age or other factors I don't know. Broadly speaking the training load and frequency (4 times / week) have been the same. I have noticed some improvements in my strength and speed during longer runs.

The forecast was for cold weather and it was chillier than normal for late April. However, it was a great day for it with blue sky most of the time and got away with wearing one or two layers most of the time.

There were more runners than in previous years with over 400 finishing. To accommodate this we were all timed with chips as is done with larger races and made for an orderly start according to predicted finish times. I have wondered how several hundred runners could all start long the narrow path of the WHW. And so at approx. 0600 I optimistically put myself in the 11-12 hours slot and set off. I was feeling good having felt rested despite rising before 4am. I had also made a point in the days before of getting enough rest/ sleep. It felt good and the camaraderie of the large number of runners probably led to my first mistake of the day – pacing. I arrived in Drymen having run faster than I had ever done that bit before. Instead of seeing that as a warning sign I interpreted it as I was going to continue this faster pace through the whole day. When faced with many hours of running that is a foolish thought to entertain especially at an early stage and so it proved to be. The warning signs were there as I discovered I had been running with people who had done the Fling in 10 ½ - 11 hours – there was no way my running would improve by 2 hours from last year but chose to ignore this. Even at Balmaha I was over 10 mins. faster than I'd ever been and with my misguided thinking served to underline my belief that I was going to have a much faster race than previously. It was around Rowardennan that this line of thinking was shattered as a deep fatigue set in that I was not really able to shake for the rest of the day.

LESSON 1– Running for many hours has a lot to do with pacing and a key tactic must be to hold back in the early stages - like a long, slow burn. I think the only way I would see improvement overall would be to improve my latter stage split timings as that is where I lose the most. The only way I can do that is to conserve energy. I also think that for me and for most runners the race is for finishing and to enjoy it whilst doing it – my attitude was not conducive to this. 3 years ago I did this race and it was all about finishing and that is what is worthwhile achieving. I should not forget this.

Another not so successful strategy was to spend minimal time at checkpoints. In theory that sounds good. Grab some food/ drink and keep moving. However, in a constant fatigued state that may not be that smart. I have often seen in this race and previous ultras people who actually spend a few moments still, resting and then shortly thereafter speeding past me in my laboured state of constant motion. I need to think this through.

LESSON 2 Whilst it's true that time at checkpoints can be wasted time I need to be aware that unremittingly pushing yourself may not be the best way forward over the long haul. I also put a lot of mental pressure on myself by adopting this approach. There are probably lessons here in living generally which is the ultimate long haul!

Regarding food and drink I have often struggled with a less than happy stomach and this was no different. I have also consistently anticipated eating far more food than I can take in. There is something very unnatural about eating food once or twice an hour for many hours and I've tried a variety of nutrition strategies. I have been thinking that an upset stomach is caused by the stress of running and eating on the move. That may be partly true but it may also be that frequently eating causes an upset stomach. That would certainly be the case when not running. Perhaps it's wise to eat less frequently overall.

And so the 2nd half of the race from about Rowardennan was tough physically and mentally. Certainly questioned why I keep putting myself through such experiences. No ready made answer I'm afraid. It was not all gruelling and the conversations with several runners are always memorable. Whether it's sharing in suffering or enjoying a comic moment it surely must look bizarre to any outsider that folks volunteering to experience pain, self doubt and fatigue should also be saying at the same time they are having a good time. Having a good time is as much a celebration of being alive as it is of physical or mental enjoyment and the fact that hundreds of men and women of all ages would want to go through such prolonged exertions seems testament that striving in adversity is part of our make up.

One woman passing me in late stages of run shouted at me *"And I thought I was running funny!"*

Another fellow I passed north of Bein Glas was walking and limping badly and had a look of abject exhaustion. When I asked if he was all right he said *'I'm finished, done in'*. For some reason this angered me and I told him that with only 20km left and with 5 hours before the 15 hours cut off, he could limp all the way and still make it. He simply had to keep putting one foot in front of the other and finishing was important. My advice was returned with a wan smile. I repeated my exhortation to him and silently prayed he would make it. My own behaviour was what surprised me most as he was only repeating to me what I felt inside, I was not feeling well and had been having very negative thoughts myself. It was a special joy to see him come in at the end RUNNING about 20 mins. after me!

It was also a joy to see Elisabeth about 1km from the finish. It had been a long journey physically and mentally. It was great to see her.

Chip Pos	RaceNo	Dryman Chip	Rowardennan Chip	Beinglas Chip	Tyndrum ChipTime
282	201	01:51:59	05:13:24	09:17:57	12:38:36



*Richard Bowman and I before the start
at about 5:30am*



Finished!