

West Highland Way Race

Saturday 21 June 2008

Race Tale by John Kynaston

If there is such a thing as a perfect race then this was it for me! That's not to say everything went perfect and it was easy. It was tough and I went through some soul searching but this race far, far exceeded my expectations. I set out with a goal to run sub 21hrs 30mins and felt that I was capable if everything went well to get under 21hrs but to join the sub20 group was way beyond what I thought I was able to do. But let me start before the beginning

Friday 20 June - the day before the race

I was determined to try and get to the start as rested as possible. The night before I slept okay but woke at 3am and dozed until 7.30am. I spent the morning sorting my gear out, doing a few admin jobs, watching the race dvd 'Closing distance' and keeping off my feet. From 1-4pm I went to bed and even though I didn't sleep soundly I did doze off and certainly I got up feeling refreshed and ready for the task ahead. For the next few hours I had a lovely pasta meal (thanks Katrina), packed the van, watched a bit of Football, went on the internet and tried to relax. I looked through my race strategy for the umpteenth time and by the time 10.45pm came I felt focused and ready to go. Katrina drove the van to Milngavie with our daughters Jo, Laura and Hollie on board (Emma is away in Bolivia for 9 weeks and would have loved to have been with us!). We also had Laura's boyfriend Josh with us.

Milngavie - 11.15pm



The scene at the car park is always very special with all the runners and support crews getting ready. There is lots of encouragement flowing round and everyone wishing everyone else a great race. I headed over to the registration where I was weighed (80.2k), picked up my goody bag and extra gear I'd bought. This year we had a necklace tag to wear which had our number on. Katrina reckoned I don't suit a necklace but hey it was only going to be for the day! I went back to the van and put on my shoes. Last year I spent a lot of nervous energy chatting to people but this time while not being rude I did keep myself apart a bit and used the half hour before the briefing to make sure I had everything ready. I went over early so I could get a seat and enjoyed watching folk coming in. Ian said to me that I didn't look as excited this year. I think that was because this year I knew how much this is going to hurt! But also because I felt focused, ready and wanted to see if I could do what I'd been planning all year since

last year to achieve namely to get to Kingshouse with enough left to be able to run!

Milngavie to Drymen (12.05miles) in 1hr 57mins 15secs (with 3min 14sec stop)

So at 1am on Saturday 21 June I was standing with another 126 people for the start of this amazing race. I was chatting to someone when suddenly we were off! I quickly started my two watches and ran up the steps and through Milngavie High Street. There was quite a crowd of supporters and it was a great feeling to be finally running.

Over the past week I had rehearsed this first 12 miles to Drymen in my head. I wanted to get there in just under 2hrs and knew how easy it is to get carried away. So I found a space on my own and settled into an easy pace. I had four mini check points along the way to make sure I was on my schedule. I went through the first one 1mins ahead and as happy with that. I was running with Thomas who I was very impressed with the fact that he, too, was starting conservatively. That can't be said for everyone and looking ahead there seemed to be a lot of people ahead of us. At one point I could see at least 30 runners in a line with I think Neal and Ian near the front and me just off the back.



The weather was perfect, clear sky, no wind to speak of and cool. I wore a short sleeved top and felt just about right. I went through my next checkpoint in 42mins (still 1min ahead) and made my way on to the track alongside the distillery. The head torch I had borrowed from my friend, Ernie was superb and lit up the path so I could run with confidence. The group had split up a bit by now and I was running with 3-4 others. I chatted a bit but generally tried to concentrate on my pace. One of things I find is that if you chat you can end up running faster than you realise.

I received my first text of the day from my daughter Emma who is in Bolivia for 9 weeks. She wrote, 'Keep focused and aim for that 2nd goblet! Wish I was there.' I know she was disappointed not to be part of Team Kynaston on the day but she was very much in our thoughts.

I went through Beech Tree, my next checkpoint, just under my target of 1hr 10mins. Team Kynaston (as they will affectionately be known from now on) were waiting for me with a water bottle and grapes. This year I was working on carrying less and seeing my back up more often.

Somewhere along the next few miles I caught up with Ian and Thomas joined us so we ran into Drymen together. Also Davie had joined us at some point so it felt very reassuring running with good friends. My final marker was the steps at Gartness and I was pleased to see I was 2mins under schedule.

I was starting to feel quite cold by now, especially my forearms so rang ahead and asked for a long sleeved top for the run over Conic Hill. I had arranged with team Kynaston to put my head torch on flashing so they could recognise it was me. People wearing head torches in the dark all look the same!! I arrived in 1hr 57mins – perfect! I didn't have a planned stop here at Drymen so quickly changed tops, exchanged water bottles and took some more grapes for the trip over Conic. I had thought about leaving the head torch but decided that even though it was getting light I would need the torch for another 30mins or so.

**Drymen to Balmaha (7.06miles) in 1hr 19min 53secs (plus 2min 16sec stop)
Overall 19.11miles in 3hrs 20mins 22secs**

Ian hadn't stopped at all at Drymen and Thomas had stopped earlier with his support team so I ran on my own for a while before catching up with Ian and Davie. I have run a lot over the last 6months with these two and while this could have been another training run we all knew this was

the real thing and there was less chatting. I had given myself 1hr 30mins for this leg and knew I could do that fairly comfortably. As we ran through the forest the light got better and better and by 3.30am it was good enough to switch off the head torch. It is such a boost to be able to run in the day light yet also to know that a whole day of running lies ahead!

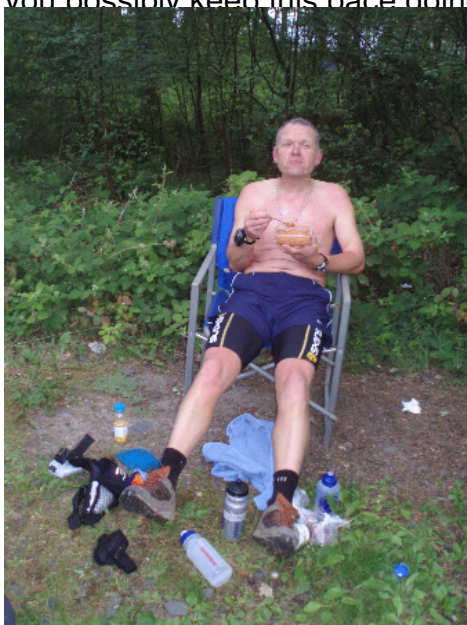
I went up and over Conic Hill just behind Davie. Ian had dropped behind a bit and a few other runners had gone past me over this section. I wasn't worried at all by this as I felt most of them seemed to be working too hard and I suspected I'd see them again. As I climbed the hill I had a phone call from a good friend at church, May. She had woken really early and decided to ring. She said I have one verse from the Bible for you, Hebrews 12:2 'Run with perseverance the race set out before you.' This was to be the first of many messages of support that really helped me along the way.

Another of my lessons learned from last year was to make sure I took it really easy coming off the hill so that I saved my quads. I knew I was ahead of my 1hr 30mins schedule so was even more cautious, allowing a few more runners to go past. I ran into Balmaha in 1hr 19mins. I had a brief stop here for some milk and smoothie. I also ate some baked beans. Team Kynaston seemed to be in good spirits and told me that Neal was about 10mins ahead. So even after all my advice he still went off too quick!! But I was told he was looking good so maybe he had it right after all and I wouldn't see him until Fort William.

**Balmaha to Rowardennan (8.49miles) in 1hr 29mins 30secs (plus 5min 42sec stop)
Overall 27.60 miles in 4hrs 52mins 09secs**

There was a lot of cars and people at Balmaha and I set off on my own again. I saw Ian with Alison so he wasn't far behind. Davie had ran strongly into Balmaha so I knew he was somewhere ahead.

Normally I really like this section but this time it was probably one of my toughest. I went past one runner and then after about 10mins or so another runner went past me as if he was doing a 10k race! I knew in my head that the pace was crazy but it did all sorts of things to my mental state. Suddenly from being very content with my pace and progress so far I suddenly had all sorts of doubts. Who are you to think you can run 95 miles in 21hrs? You're feeling sore now - how can you possibly keep this pace going? Remember how you felt at Kingshouse last year - you will be



pace is a lot about mental toughness and they are right. For the up and concentrate, not on the end, but on getting to I'd scheduled. During this time I received a text from my good the beauty around you and run towards the goal.' It was word to do this race and I do love it so enjoy. It's amazing how one , even though I knew there was a long way to go, I was going to

At some point I met up with a guy called Andrew who was doing the race for the first time. We chatted a bit. He was aiming for 24hrs but by this stage he was on a sub 21 pace so was a bit concerned for him. At one point he asked me whether I was planning to run at this pace the whole way. When I said yes he

seemed a bit surprised.

This year they had a couple of extra marshals through the forest to make sure everyone went the longer way off road rather than on the road. The first marshal said 'I know you, number 93, from your blog!' This was also to be a constant theme of the day. So if you are reading this – thank you! The second marshal was Lucy Colquhoun who sat at the bottom of a hill ticking off names. Lucy was so encouraging and smiling. I'm sure she was the same for each and every runner. The marshals give up a whole weekend to help this race run smoothly and their encouragement and support is really appreciated, even if on the day we don't respond!

By the time I arrived at Rowardennan I felt fine but was looking forward to sitting down. This year I had planned 5min stops and I would sit. I changed tops, had some more baked beans, drank some milk and a smoothie. By this stage some of the Team Kynaston were finding the pace a bit much and were asleep in the van! Katrina was a star and soon had me fed and watered and ready to go. I wouldn't see my team until Beinglas (at least 3hrs away) so I wished them a good breakfast at McDonalds and set off for the next leg.

Rowardennan to Inversnaid (7.15miles) in 1hr 19mins 10secs (plus 1min 44sec stop)Overall 34.77miles in 6hrs 17mins 02secs

I had given myself 1hr 25mins to Inversnaid and remembered that it the Fling I had done this section in 1hr 11mins so again I felt it was achievable with a steady sensible pace. I was really enjoying running on my own and was really into the race by now. I felt focused and was staying within the moment. I was trying hard not to get carried away but to concentrate on this next section. I made my way steadily up the route and passed a few runners on the way. I caught Andrew again who had not stopped at Rowardennan. This was the last time I saw him and I don't think I saw him at the prize giving so assume he must have dropped out somewhere. He was running with Davie and soon enough Davie dropped him and joined up with me!

At some point another runner caught us, Helen, who was running the race for the first time and going very well. I don't know anything about her but she had a very English accent and it made me smile. Davie with his very broad Scots accent in front and Helen with her very English accent behind and me in middle, with a foot in both camps, to keep them apart! Well you've got to keep your mind active!

We arrived together at Inversnaid ahead of my schedule. This check point is really hard to get to so the race organisers set it up that you can have a bag with food waiting for you. So while a very helpful marshal replenished my water I quickly found my bag, drank the smoothie, put the rice pudding in my pocket and I was away.

Inversnaid to Beinglas Farm (6.46miles) in 1hr 30mins 36secs (plus 5min 17secs stop)Overall 40.99miles in 7hrs 49mins 22secs

For most runners this is the one of the toughest sections as the terrain is very rocky and full of tree roots making parts impossible to run. Plus you have been going for over hours. I was just ahead of Davie and Helen and was happy to be leading at this point. It was great to be running with Davie as he said, 'I really enjoy this section. I know most people don't but I do!' Again it amazing how a positive comment can encourage you. This one did for me but I felt I was holding up Davie and Helen who were right behind me. So I let Davie go past and soon he opened a bit of a gap. The Helen went past and I was on my own. I remained positive and actually felt better going at my pace rather than feeling I had to go quicker for others. Then Davie stopped for a wee and Helen

was leading the way. Davie soon came past and I was at the back again.

It was during this stage I started to sing my mantra to myself that became a bit of a recurring theme throughout the day. Our good friend Renita retold the classic story of the Hare and the Tortoise. You can see it on this blog. Anyway she has a chorus of the Slo Mo Turtle singing, 'Slow and steady' and for the next half an hour or so and several other times throughout the day I sang this to myself to keep a slow and steady rhythm. It worked because before I knew it I had caught up with Davie and Helen and we ran into Beinglas together. So we left Inversnaid together and arrived at Beinglas together but had spent the majority of the time apart!



At Beinglas Team Kynaston were ready and waiting after their McDonalds Breakfast. I sat down and had some milk, smoothie, some beans and changed into a vest. I was pleased to have got through that section and even more pleased to realise that I had done it in 1hr 30mins which was 7mins faster than the Fling. Thanks to Davie & Helen! The feeling of pleasure didn't last though as Katrina told me about Ian.

Over the last 18months Ian has become one of my best friends and I have really enjoyed getting to know him and Alison his wife. Ian has run this race 7 times and is so generous and willing to help and encourage other runners. We have had a friendly rivalry this year and have pushed each on to run faster and stronger. I know Ian is not a quitter and on many occasions in our runs together I have seen Ian dig in and get through tough sections, coming back stronger. So to hear that he had dropped out at Rowardennan was gutting. I know he must have been feeling really bad and I really felt for him. I don't know how I would have coped. It just shows what a strong character he is that instead of going home he decided to watch the rest of the race and encourage others. As hard as the news was to take I knew I had to get going and refocus. Katrina said that Neal was 15mins ahead and going well so I decided to focus on what's ahead rather than what's behind. I know Ian would have told me to do that! (sorry – that sounds as though he died!!!).

**Beinglas Farm to Auchtertyre (9.48miles) in 1hrs 48mins 23secs (plus 5min 32sec stop)
Overall 50.87miles in 9hrs 48mins 23secs**

Just as I left Beinglas I saw Hugh not far ahead. I had ran with Hugh a few times last year and in the whw 07 race he stormed past me on the Lairig Mor and beat me by 30mins or so. Also he beat me again in the Highland Fling this year (and for good measure by 1 place in the National Cross Country at Falkirk) so I knew he was running well. We ran together for a bit, talking about Ian and how the race was going. He seemed okay but I sensed I was going stronger. I reminded him on my video bit that he had gone past me last year and he said he was planning the same again. So I stored that away for later on! Davie caught us and I ran into Derrydaroch with Davie with Hugh not too far behind.

Team Kynaston were waiting at Derrydaroch, quick pause to grab some water, a rice pudding and my bag of fruit and I was off. I knew that this was going to be a key section. I had given myself 2hrs 15mins which I felt was reasonable but there wouldn't be much room for error. Last year in

the Fling this was a tough part for me. I fell twice and it didn't have particularly happy memories but this year in the Fling I had ran well so decided to dwell on the positive and not the negative.

I was repeating my 'slow and easy' mantra and soon arrived at the underpass on the A82. I was surprised to see Caroline (Neal's wife) so I asked how far is Neal ahead. She pointed to the top of the small hill and said there about 30secs ahead!

I went past another couple of runners and set off to catch Neal. I didn't push too hard as if I had caught up 15mins since Beinglas then I was obviously going quicker so he would come back to me. The gap reduced until I was finally along him. I took a video clip to record the moment! Neal and I run with the same club, Kilbarchan AAC. Ever since Neal had decided to enter the race, having watched me train and run last year, I had been wondering who would win. Over all our training runs and other races (mostly separate) it was clear that it would be close. The main advantage I felt I had was the experience of running the race last year and having a clearer idea of what is involved. The furthest Neal had run was 53miles and like me last year going past Tyndrum was going to take him into new territory. I hadn't handled that well last year and I wondered how Neal would find it.

We ran together for the next few miles and I thought Neal looked okay but was struggling with a few issues. His feet were sore with some blisters and he hadn't eaten enough and was feeling generally tired having missed a night's sleep. I told him about Ian and he too was disappointed for him. We talked about where one or two other friends might be. We knew that Marco was ahead going well and that Thomas was behind but I was expecting him to catch any time soon. Davie had dropped off my pace as I caught Neal. Then Neal told me that Brian was ahead. I had assumed that Brian was behind me somewhere so he became the next target to catch! This was Brian's third attempt to complete the race having had to pull out with injuries and I knew he was determined to get that goblet (which he did finishing in 21hrs 30mins 34secs).

I could see Brian ahead as I went through the forest above Crianlarich. On one of the many up hills I walked and ate my rice pudding. At Auchtertyre Donald and Stevie would be taking over from Katrina, our girls and Josh. Donald has been nagging (in the nicest way!) all year about making sure this year that I eat more. So I thought before I see him I better eat my rice pudding otherwise the first thing Donald will say will be to tell me off. As I ate Neal went past and caught up with Brian. I now had two targets to catch, and catch them I did! We ran down the final hill to the road together. The last thing I heard Brian say was enjoy the rest of the race and go for that target. I wasn't convinced that would be the last I saw of them but I hoped it would!!

I was just about 50 yards ahead of them running from the road into Auchtertyre. There are four gates to go through and each time I'd open it and try and leave it as wide as possible for them to run through but each time it closed just before it got there and they had to open it again! Sorry guys but I wasn't going to be the doorman!

What with running with Neal and Brian, talking about Ian and others, making sure I ate so Donald wouldn't be cross I hadn't really looked at my time for, oh at least 20mins, so I was very surprised and happy to see that the section has taken me 1hr 54mins. That was well inside the 2hrs 15mins I'd allocated. So I was now almost 50mins ahead of my 21hr 30min schedule. Happy days! I saw Ian as I ran him but didn't get a chance to chat.

This year the race organisers had decided to weigh all the runners at the start and finish and at

two points in between. I must admit I had been a bit concerned about this. How would it work? How much time would be wasted getting weighed? What would happen if I lost/gained too much weight? But in practice it was absolutely fine. As I arrived I went to the tent, stepped on the scale (I'd gained a very small amount), stepped off and ran down to the lower car park where Team Kynaston were waiting. Katrina had had a bit of rough time as she wasn't allowed to park in the top car park and turning the van round was easy but being the star she is she did it and didn't tell me about the drama until later.

Donald, in his efficient way made sure I had all I needed and I was off again.

**Auchtertyre to Bridge of Orchy (9.18miles) in 1hr 46mins 58secs (plus 4mins 36sec stop)
Overall 60.05miles in 11hrs 40mins 54secs**

As I left Auchtertyre on my own I started preparing myself for going past Tyndrum. As I mentioned earlier, this was such a tough section mentally last year. Going past the finish line of the Fling meant I was into completely new territory and I didn't handle it well. Also Ian caught me on the way to Bridge of Orchy so I knew I wanted to get myself ready for the challenge ahead. Even though Tyndrum is 53miles into the race it feels like half way and it can seem a daunting task to have to do it all again.



So I ran slow and steady. Speaking of which about a mile or so before Tyndrum my phone rang. It was Renita! All she said was, 'Remember SLOW & STEADY wins the race'. She didn't ask me anything else and say much more but again it came at just the right time! Thanks.

Donald was waiting for me at Tyndrum and I took another rice pudding and a bag of fruit to eat on the way. The fruit was great this year. Each time I was given a bag with some grapes, small orange (peeled and divided) and some strawberries. It felt such a treat and I could eat them fine. Having said that after many hours the acid in the fruit did react with my mouth and I needed plenty of water after the fruit.

I went through Tyndrum in 10hrs 29mins. As I walked up the hill I thought for the first time about a possible finishing time. After the Fling this year Ian sent me a text saying that he thought I was capable of running sub20. I didn't really take it seriously as it seemed too way out there but he said if you can get to Tyndrum in 10hrs 30mins you would have 9hrs 30mins to make it. I've ran from Tyndrum to Fort William on our March training run in 8hrs 25mins. So I had an hour to spare. That sounds fine but consider last year. I was at Tyndrum in just over 11hrs and then took 11hrs 40mins to get to Fort William.

So sub20 was still in fantasy land. I concentrated on getting to Bridge of Orchy in the 1hr 55mins I'd scheduled from Auchtertyre. This is probably one of the easiest sections as it is fairly flat with an overall drop in height. I was running fine and very much focused on the task ahead. Once I crossed under the railway line I settled into a run. One of the lessons I learnt from last year's race was when you have a good patch make it last as long as possible. My temptation last year was that when I felt good I pushed it so inevitably the good patch didn't last long! So all year (again

with Donald's encouragement) I have been working on a pace I can maintain for longer. So my mantra for the next hour was 'slow and steady, MAKE IT LAST, slow and steady, MAKE IT LAST.' It worked as I ran for the next 30mins or more without stopping. In fact I ran all the way to the bridge, over the stile and then off again to Bridge of Orchy. I didn't see anyone on this whole section. The guys behind were still behind and I couldn't see anyone ahead. But I did have some company for the last 15mins. A friend of Ian's called Stan had emailed me in the week saying he would like to run together on the Braes some Fridays and he would be watching the race. He had an idea of where I might be so ran from Bridge of Orchy to see me. When he saw me, he turned round and we ran in together. It was good to meet him and I'm sure we'll run together again. Stan did the race a number of years ago and is keen to enter next year.



I ran past the train station where Katrina was sitting in the van. I didn't see the other members of Team Kynaston – presumably catching up on sleep! As I crossed the road I saw Phil Tipping and Liz Mestecky who were supporting Phil. Phil did the race a few years ago in 28hrs or something but beat me in the Fling and I knew he was going really well. I heard a few times that he was about 15-20mins ahead.

Donald and Stevie had everything ready for me so within a few minutes I was fed and watered and off to do battle with the Rannoch Mor. We'd arranged to meet at Inveroran Hotel so I only

need half a water bottle and some jelly babies. We would also make a decision about having a support runner. Donald told me I was in 15th place.

Bridge of Orchy to Kingshouse (11.97miles) in 2hrs 33mins 02secs (plus 5min 29sec stop) Overall 72.02miles in 14hrs 18mins 33secs)

As I walked up the hill out of Bridge of Orchy I decided to give my parent a ring. They had been following my progress with updates from Jo and when my Mum heard my voice I could sense they thought something was wrong! So I reassured them I was fine and going well!

It is a fair climb out of Bridge of Orchy and I tried to walk as fast as possible and then once over the top started to run down. I could see the Inveroran Hotel and thought about whether I wanted a support runner over Rannoch Moor. Originally Plan A had been for Stevie to run this section, the Donald the next one from Kingshouse but Donald had caught a nasty bug last weekend and wasn't sure whether he would run. So Plan B was for Stevie to run with me from Kingshouse to the end and do Rannoch on my own. We did have a Plan C which involved Caroline running with me!

I think Stevie was ready to run Rannoch and there was a little miscommunication but basically I felt I was going well and would rather have support from Kingshouse. Anyway I took what I needed – some fruit and rice pudding and I was away.

For the section from Bridge of Orchy to Kingshouse I had allocated 2hrs 25mins. When Ian saw my schedule, this was the only section he thought wasn't realistic. He said that the best he has

ever done it in a race is 2hrs 35mins so I was working on 2hrs 40mins as being acceptable. My time was based on running this section in 2hr 5mins on training runs but that was starting from Bridge of Orchy not having already run 60miles!

I ran the road and then once over the stile I walked up the long hill. I'd forgotten just how long that hill is and it seemed ages before I was over the top and could run. All day I passed a number of walkers who were all so encouraging. They must have picked up that this was a race and told me how awesome I was doing (I think they were from America!).

Once I got running I could see a number of dots in the distance and decided to try and catch the next one. The first one wasn't running so I caught him fairly soon so I'm now up to 14th. There were two more not too far ahead and soon enough I went past them. One was a support runner so I was now up to 13th. I went past another, then another so I was now 11th and I had ran, walked across the Rannoch Moor.

I then saw a runner coming towards me. I quickly recognised it was Stevie. Donald had dropped him off at Black Rock Cottage and he'd ran back to see me. So we ran in together for a while. Our topic of conversation was dominated by what would happen if I went past one more person and was in 10th. The rules state that the top 10 can't have a support runner. So we talked about the possibility of moving to Plan D – no supporter runner at all!!

Another piece of news that Stevie had was a bit unsettling! Stevie had heard from one of the marshals that if you had a support runner when you are 11th, then move into 10th you'll be disqualified!! I now know this was wrong but at the time it wasn't what I wanted to hear. If that was right then the very fact that Stevie was running with me now might cause me to be disqualified later seemed to be very unfair!

Anyway with a couple of miles to go Stevie ran ahead with my orders for Kingshouse and I ran in on my own. I completed the section in 2hrs 33mins which I was very happy with.

At Kingshouse there was a number of friends including Ian, Alison, Caroline and the rest of Neal's support, Silke and Thomas's support team. I sat down and ate some more beans, drank some milk and Smoothie.



I asked again about the support runner situation and it was cleared up that I could have a support runner from the next section but if I passed someone my support would have to leave me. So the plan was for Stevie to run to the bottom of the Devil's staircase and Donald (who was feeling better) to go with me over the top and into Kinlochleven.

I left Kingshouse on 14hrs 24mins and the last thing I remember anyone saying was a comment by Ian. He said you now have 5hrs 30mins to get to Fort William to break 20hrs. You can do that easily. I wasn't sure about the easily bit but I started to contemplate that it might, just might be possible! It was a thought that would dominate my thinking for the next 5hrs 35mins!!!!

**Kingshouse to Kinlochleven (9.11miles) in 2hrs 13mins 17secs (plus 4min 17secs stop)
Overall 81.14miles in 16hrs 37mins 19secs**

Ever since I did this race for the first time last year I have tried to train with one main thought in mind. I wanted to be able to run to Kingshouse in a similar time to 07 but with enough energy and fitness left to be able to still run. Now finally I was here and I could!!

I ran at my slow and steady pace with Stevie to the stile and then walked up the hill. It is about 3miles to the foot of the staircase and I remember doing in 34mins on our 2 day run. I knew I would be a bit slower but hoped to be not too much longer. I would say from this point onwards I found it hard to run on uneven surfaces. I was okay when it was smooth but on rocky, uneven ground I was struggling a bit.

We reached the bottom of the staircase in about 40mins so that was fine and Donald took over as support. There was a mention that Kate Jenkins might have pulled out but there was nothing official so we carried on with the support runner plan. We decided if I did overtake someone and we knew I was in 10th place Donald would push on to Kinlochleven.



As I walked up the Devil's Staircase my thoughts returned to the possibility of running a sub 20hrs. It still felt unobtainable but realistically it was within reach if I could keep going. I was well aware that there was a long way to go and so much could go wrong. It felt like a carrot being dangled ahead of me that I could never reach!

Donald walked behind me and told me at the top we would have a drink and rice pudding and then we'd get going again. I couldn't wait for yet another rice pudding!!!! But I knew I had to keep eating. And if I didn't know Donald would tell me again!

We reached the top and like an obedient pupil I ate my rice pudding and we were off. Last year by this stage my quads were so sore that for a while I had to walk backwards down the hill as they were so painful. The difference this year! All my training and preparation really paid off as I ran down to Kinlochleven.

As far as the sub 20 goal I realised that I needed to concentrate on getting to Kinlochleven in nearer 2hrs than 2hrs 30mins. Then I'd reassess and work out if it was still possible.

I was conscious of talking a lot on the way down! I'm not sure what was in that rice pudding but I definitely had a new lease of life and I was talking about all sorts of things. I'm Donald would have preferred it if I ran faster and talked less!!



With about a mile to go Donald ran into Kinlochleven to help Stevie get organised. I was still running strong and because it was a good even surface I ran right into the checkpoint. There was a small crowd waiting including Caroline and I must admit I had goose bumps and a tear in my eye as they clapped me in. I had ran the section in 2hrs 13mins and that carrot was still being dangled in front of my eyes!!

Race doctor Ellis was waiting to weigh me. I'd lost a kilo but was well within the limits. Peter D was there. Peter lives in Kinlochleven and had the race last year beating me by 30mins or so. I think he was very surprised to see me there so early. I sat down to eat some more beans and drink some milk and smoothie. Peter was asking me various questions

and I could see Donald was getting annoyed as he wanted me to eat more and talk less!



After 4mins or so I was up and off. We were told officially that Kate had dropped out and that I was now in 10th position and so couldn't have a support runner. On the way in Donald had told me to prepare myself for this. He didn't want me to suddenly have to readjust and as always it was good advice. I suppose there was one plus point – at least I wouldn't have Donald trying to force feed me over the Lairig Mor like last year!! Only kidding Donald.

**Kinlochleven to Lundavra (7.48miles) in 1hrs 53mins 18secs (no stop)
Overall 88.62miles in 18hrs 34mins 56secs**

As I left I realised that I had 3hrs 20mins to get to Fort William. So I broke it up into 1hr 40mins to Lundavra and 1hr 30mins to Fort William. Now the mathematicians among will see a flaw in this reasoning but it took me well over an hour before I spotted it!

I ran along the road and then made my way up the long hill out of Kinlochleven. This can be a tough section when you are fresh but with 81 miles in your legs it is hard. I pushed as sensibly as possible and eventually found my self at the top after about 26mins.

For me this section along the Lairig Mor is one the hardest mentally. You can see the path winding its way for miles in front of you. Then you get over the first horizon and there is another, then another and then one more before you see the forest and the way in to Lundavra. So I knew I had to be mentally tough for this bit. I ran as much as I could but the ground is so uneven and my legs were not responding to any slight stumbles.

Just before the top I received a text from a friend at church, Sandra. She won't mind me saying that she is not a runner but Sandra has taken a real interest in my running and reads my blog and often asks (and listens when I go on and on!!) how things are going. Sandra found some running quotes on the internet and sent them to me. The one that arrived on my phone came at just the right time. Sandra wrote, 'Tough times don't last Tough people do.' I knew for the next hour or so it was going to be a tough time. No support runner with this carrot of sub 20hrs dangling in front of me. But it won't last but if I'm tough I would!! So thanks Sandra – you won't realise how much that text helped me.

I ran, I walked, I drank, I ate, I ran, I walked, I drank, I ate until I could see the crest of the last long hill and I knew the forest would be in sight. I could see from my watch that I would be well over the 1hr 40mins and that my outside dream of a sub 20 was well and truly over. I decided that I would rather be 20hrs 10mins than 20hrs 2mins.

Then I looked at my watch and particularly the overall time. I reckon I was about 20mins from Lundavra and the overall time said 18hrs 10mins. So 18hrs 10mins plus 20mins makes 18hrs 30mins. Doh!! Now the eagle eyes among you (if anyone is still reading this????) will have spotted straight away that 1hr 40mins plus 1hr 30mins equals 3hr 10mins and not 3hr 20min that I thought.

So from nowhere I was suddenly given 10mins and that carrot was well and truly back dangling in front of me! Just about this time I saw a runner in white ahead and I was slowly but surely catching him.

I went through the sheep pen and down the hill and realised it was Marco!! His shin was really hurting him and he was struggling to keep going but he did and finished in an amazing 20hrs 47mins.

Donald had run out half a mile from the checkpoint as allowed by the rules and we ran in together. Surprise surprise Donald wanted me to stop for some food but I knew that this was going to the wire and there was no way I was stopping to eat and miss a sub 20 by the time I wasted sitting!!! Even Donald wasn't prepared to argue on this one!!

So I paused enough to have a drink of milk, grab some food and I was off on the final leg of this amazing race. I had 1hr 25mins to get to Fort William. Oh that carrot felt so close yet so far away.

Lundavra to Fort William (6.82miles) in 1hrs 24mins 33sec

Overall 95.44miles in 19hrs 59mins 33secs

I had run this section on our 2 day run in 1hr 07mins. That was at the end of a 75mile two day run so I was tired but finished strong. I had only 18mins to play with. Also I remembered Ian saying last year he got to Lundavra with 1hr 15mins left to break sub 21. He finished in 21hrs 11mins so took 1hr 26mins for this section so if my maths was right I still had a chance.

I wanted to try and get to the big stile at top of the forest with 35mins to go. On the 2 day run I'd ran from there non stop in 27mins so knew I'd need a few more minutes in hand.

So I decided to run as much as possible. I would have to walk the hills but everything else would have to be run. This pain wouldn't last and I could rest as much as I wanted very soon.

After about 15mins I was caught by an Austrian runner, Ernst Fink (though I didn't know his name then). He was one of the runners I'd gone past on the Rannoch Mor a few hours ago. He was now running strong and so I latched on to him. I couldn't have a support runner so he was next best thing! Thanks Ernst as you pulled me along for a good 5-10mins. When we came to next hill he continued to run and I walked so I was on my own again. Then about 15mins further on he came back!! Not to help me but because he wasn't sure of the way. I told him the way to go and once more latched on to him and he helped me though a few more minutes before disappearing into the distance. Just before he left I said to him that we could make a sub 20 if we kept it going. He said 'oh is that right' as if he hadn't even thought about the possibility. As he ran off I thought here am I – dominated by the possibility of breaking 20hrs for the last 5hours if not the last 10hrs and he hasn't even thought about it!!!!!!!!!!!! He finished 9th in 19hrs 53mins 04secs and would have been even quicker if he knew the way!

Eventually I came out of the forest and saw the stile. I had 37mins to go. I was inside my target and for the first time I really believed it was possible. By no means certain but definitely possible. Then I saw this big orange fence blocking the whw route with a division sign. Dario had said at the pre-race briefing that there were no divisions so what was this? My first thought was to go under it but thought I'd better not. Later I found that others knocked it down and went the normal route. But not me! I followed the division wondering how cruel would it be if I missed sub 20hrs because of a division. It seemed to be taking me away from the route and just at the point where I was starting to panic 2 walkers came up the path. I asked them was this taking me to the whw path and thankfully they said yes just follow the path. It came out a bit further down the wide path just at the top of the part where there is a big sweeping left hand bend. I don't think it added too much to the route but I didn't have much time to play with!!

I set off down the hill determined to run as much and as far as possible. I knew how close this was going to be. I felt okay but could sense I was starting to struggle. There was a small incline about half way down and I stopped to walk and drink some water. Then I found it really hard to get going again. I ran for a bit, I walked for a bit. Then two runners went past me. Gavin McKilney and his support runner. I was now in 11th place but that didn't worry me. What concerned me was that I was going to miss a sub 20 by maybe a minute or two. I took time to accept this fact. At one point I even considered walking all the way to the car park so I would be 20hrs 5mins rather than 20hrs 1min or even 20hrs 00mins 10secs!

I told myself that I will not say, even to myself, that I'm disappointed at missing out on a sub 20. I knew that 20hrs 1min is a great time and I will, repeat WILL be happy with that. No regrets.

So I made my way to the Braveheart car park content but resigned to missing the sub 20. But Donald and Stevie had other ideas!!! My plan was to run in wearing my Kilbarchan vest. They had forgotten to bring it and Stevie asked whether I wanted it. I said yes thinking they had the car at the car park but Stevie then sets off back to the leisure centre to get it!! Sorry Stevie. If I'd realised I won't have said yes.

As I was now in 11th place Donald could run with me and as we turned left and road on the road into Fort William we had 10mins to break sub 20. I told Donald it wasn't going to happen and I was at peace with that! But Donald had such confidence in me that I could do it that I felt I owed it to him to at least try! But in all honesty I started running to please him rather than with any hopes of making it.



Somehow Donald said and did the right things at just the right time. If I slowed a little he gently encouraged me, telling me it was possible. Then he said 'John, imagine it's the last session of a Monday fartlek. You can do it.' I still didn't think it was possible but then the 30 sign coming into Fort William suddenly appeared. I looked at my watch and I had 4mins. I pushed on as hard as possible. Then I ran past the whw official end post with 2mins to go. The 400 yards I sprinted for all I was worth. I had tears in my eyes that I couldn't see my watch so I just ran to the doors of the leisure centre. I could team

Kynaston and others clapping. At the last second I remember Dario saying that your time finishes when you hit the doors so I hit them so hard there was in doubt I'd finished!!!!

I was still unsure as to whether I'd made it until the marshal read my time, '19hrs 59mins 33secs.' She said it so matter of factly that I felt like saying, 'Do you realise how that has dominated the last hours of my life!!!!'

Ian came in and shook my hand and congratulated me, then I went outside to see everyone. They were all so pleased for me. It took quite a while for it to sink in and even lying in our tent at night with the wind and rain outside I couldn't quite understand how I'd done it. But I do know that I couldn't have made it within the help of my support team. So a massive thank you to Katrina, Jo, Laura, Hollie, Josh, Stevie and Donald. A simple thank you is not enough but I think you all know how much this means to me and how much I appreciate your help in getting me to the finish in 19hrs 59mins 33secs. Plus thanks to everyone who send me texts. Some I haven't even met but who have read my blog.

I don't know why I was panicking so much – I had a good 27 seconds to spare!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

How would I feel if I'd missed it by a few seconds? I honestly don't know. I'd like to think I would have kept to the promised I made myself as I ran into Fort William that I would not be disappointed but who knows. Last year when I finished the race I knew I had unfinished business and I wanted to come back and run a better time. This feels so different. In my heart of hearts I know I can't beat this and I'm not going to try. I will run the race again next year and years to come as I just love it but I'm going to set different goals and enjoy it in a different way.



Receiving my goblet from Dario, Race coordinator



Jo, Katrina, Hollie, John, Laura & Josh



Donald, John and Stevie