

My Greatest Race

Rebekah running the 100k race in the 2040 Olympics

By John Kynaston

Chapter 1

7.30am Sunday 30 September 2040

Thirty minutes to go before the biggest race of my career. I can't believe I'm finally just a few minutes away from running 100 kilometres in a GB vest at the 37th Summer Olympics in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. I feel I've been preparing and waiting for this race my whole life. For the last 24hrs I've been waiting and preparing, preparing and waiting and now I'm lined up with 140 other top class ultra runners in the first ever men and women's joint 100k race.

I always find the last hour or so before a race the worse. I've done all that needs to be done and all I can do is wait for the gun and the start of the race. I try to relax but basically all I want to do is to get going. I have my race strategy and I'm keen to start the race and put it into action. My head is full of questions and doubts. Have I done enough training? Have I done too much training? Have I tapered well? Have I eaten enough? Will my lack of sleep last night hinder my run?

I look around the waiting room and all the other runners are in their own little worlds, concentrating on the task ahead. Maybe their heads too are full of the same questions. We are all aware that the next few hours will be hard but the most exciting time in our lives. This is why we run hundreds of miles every month, in the early hours of the morning and whenever we can fit it in, through all the seasons whether sun, rain, snow or wind to make sure we are in the best shape of our lives for the really big races and this is the biggest.

The 100k race was added to the Olympic programme in 2032 so this will be the third time it is run as an Olympic race. Ultra running has become more and more popular over the last 30 years or so and now it is seen as a major event in the Olympics. Today is the final day of the Addis Ababa games and the 100k race the final event. The people of Ethiopia and of Africa are rightly very proud of their first ever staging of the summer Olympics and though thousands have been involved and played their part it is all down to the work of one man Haile Gebreselassie.

Gebrellassie was born in 1973 and is widely recognised as one of the greatest distance runners in history. He was one of 10 children and as a child growing up on a farm he used to run ten kilometres to school every morning and the same back every evening. This led to his distinctive running posture with his left arm crooked as if still holding his schoolbooks.

Gebrellassie came to international recognition in 1992 when he won the 5,000 and 10,000 metre races at the 1992 Junior World Championships in Seoul. Over the next few years he won several cross country world titles. He then went on to dominate on the track as well and broke the world records in both the 5,000 and 10,000 metres. He won the gold medal in Atlanta in 1996 for the 10,000m and successfully defended his title at the 2000 games in Sydney. In 2004 in Athens he was going for a third victory but was beaten by his compatriot Kenenisa Bekele in a thrilling final.

After the 2004 Olympic Gebrellassie focused on road racing and the marathon. He went on to dominate on the roads as he had done on the track and won major city marathons all over the world. He broke the world record for the Marathon at Berlin in 2008 when he ran 2hrs 3mins 59secs, the first ever to run under 2.04.

In 2012 Gebrellassie won the gold medal at the Marathon at the London games in what is considered to be one of the greatest ever marathon races. At the half way mark Gebrellassie was part of a group of five runners who had broken away from the rest of the field. Stride for stride

they pushed on, testing each other with injections of pace. At one stage it looked as though Gebrelassie was falling off the leading pack but he showed remarkable character to get back to the group and then with five miles to go he took to the front and slowly wound up the pace.

One by one he dropped the other runners until there was just Gebrelassie and Paul Tergat from Kenya his great track and marathon rival. They ran together through the packed streets of London. The cheering was deafening as the crowds recognised here were two athletes at the peak of the career giving it all they had for the honour of winning the Olympic Marathon not only for themselves but for their country.

Two miles to go, one mile to go and still they were neck and neck with nothing to separate them. Incredibly after 26 miles of running they entered the Olympic stadium side by side with 385 yards to go and gave one last push for the line and that gold medal. Tergat made the first move and down the back straight of the track with 250 metres to go he opened up a gap of one, two, three metres. It looked decisive and just as the crowd began to think it was over Gebrelassie made one last effort and round the final bend he once more pulled level with Tergat.

In a repeat of the 2000 games 10,000m race Gebrelassie out sprinted Tergat down that final 100 metres to win by the margin of 0.12 of a second. It was the closest ever winning margin in an Olympic Marathon. The 90,000 people in the Olympic Stadium and the millions watching on TV throughout the world knew they had witnessed a race that they would probably never see again.

Gebrelassie then amazingly decided that he wouldn't run anymore Marathons and decided to move up to running ultra races. Ultra races are classed as anything over the 26 miles 385 yards Marathon distance. For two years he wasn't seen on the international racing circuit but news of him running incredible distances in training started to filter out of Ethiopia.

Then in 2016 he ran his first ever 100k race and immediately lowered the world record to 6hrs 29mins 42secs. He was the first man to go under 6hrs 30mins and had set the benchmark for athletes to come. The 100k race had become more and more popular with elite and the general running public alike and now that such a distinguished runner like Gebrelassie was competing it opened the way for an even bigger increase in events, sponsorship and world wide recognition.

Over the next few years the IAAF standardised the event and the present format of a 10k loop ran 10 times had become the accepted pattern. This was accepted by the athletes and the spectators as being the best format. It meant that the athletes had back up every 40mins or so for the elite runners and the spectators could watch from a central stand and see the action unfold in front of their eyes. Crowds of 50,000 were not uncommon and the drama of seeing top class athletes push themselves to the limit and beyond was compelling viewing.

Gebrelassie dominated the 100k race for the next few years until he eventually at the age of 45 in 2018 officially retired from International competition. Gebrelassie continued to run and set about breaking as many Veteran records as he could but he began in a sense his greatest life work to bring the Olympics to his beloved Ethiopia.

When he retired he announced to the world's press that he would love to see the Olympics given to Ethiopia. Everyone politely agreed with him but no-one thought it would happen in his life time. So Gebrelassie set out with the same determination that he had showed when he ran to school and back every day as a child and that same determination he showed throughout his brilliant athletic career in cross country, on the track, in Marathon and ultra marathons.

He worked with his government to set up the bid. He worked with the commercial world to attract sponsorship. He worked with neighbouring countries to help them see the benefit that the games would bring to Africa. He tirelessly lobbied the delegates of the Olympic movement who would make the decision.

It took him many years but in 2034 Ethiopia was awarded the 2040 games. The country of Ethiopia went wild with parties throughout the land and every single person knew that it was down to one man and his fierce determination to make his dream and the dream of his country come true.

Over the next 6 years Ethiopia worked and worked and even though there were times when it looked doubtful they would deliver, deliver they did and now the Games of the 37th Summer Olympiad were coming to an end. The final race was one that was very close to Gebrelassie's heart.

The 100k race would be the first time that men and women would compete together in the same race. Again Gebrelassie was central in making this happen. World records continued to be lowered at every event from 100m to 100k but the difference between men and women was the smallest in the 100k distance. Several major event organisers recognised this and throughout the year there were many races where men and women competed together in the same race for the same prize money.

The Olympics took a little longer to recognise this but in 2035 the women's world record for the 100k was lowered to 6hrs 28mins 20secs which was 15secs faster than the men's world record! The pressure from the sporting public was intense as people wanted to see men and women compete against each other on the greatest stage for the biggest prizes.

Gebrelassie put all his considerable clout behind the move and so the IOC agreed to have the 100k race at the Addis Ababa games a joint race between men and women. So after all the negotiations, all the lobbying the time had come to see the reality – the first ever men and women's 100k race.

Chapter 2

7.40am Sunday 30 September 2040

With twenty minutes to go I'm called with the other athletes to the start. We walk out into the amazing Olympic Stadium. It is full to capacity with over 100,000 spectators. The race will begin and end in the stadium plus we will run around the track every 10k so the spectators are settling down to watch the race unfold over the next 6-7 hours.

The anticipation is great as Ethiopia have two of the favourites for the race, Hagos (Men's current world record holder) and Abrihet (Reigning Olympic and World 100k champion). Plus a third member of their team Lebna, whose main role will be to set the pace for his compatriots. Some of the crowd have been in their seats since 6am when the stadium opened. Tickets for this event were like gold dust and many paid a year's salary just to witness this race.

As soon as the Ethiopian team entered the stadium the crowd erupted into a frenzy of excitement and noise. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end and I realised just how different this race was going to be from anything I've ever experienced in my life.

I could see a small crowd of GB supporters with their Union Jacks and Saltires waving and cheering. I knew they would make up in volume what they lacked in numbers. It was so good to have supporters cheering us on. I knew from experience when the going gets hard a group of supporters can make the difference.

We went on a very easy warm up lap but with over 6hrs of running to come we all knew that the first 10k loop would be the warm up before the race started in earnest. The noise was incredible especially as I ran near the Ethiopian team. Every group we passed wanted to shout their encouragement and I felt the weight the expectation for them. I wondered whether this would work against them or whether it would inspire them to greater things. We would soon find out.

The athletes were called to the start and introduced to the crowd. From Australia there was Libby, Alistair and Greg. I thought back to a recent training camp I'd been on with them and knew they were all capable of running under 6hrs 45mins and would be in the mix from the start. As well as the Ethiopian athletes Kenya had a very strong trio of runners including Kerega whose world record was broken by Hagos. I knew he was very keen to get it back and that this race had become a personal battle between him and Hagos for that world record. I was hoping that they would be so concerned with each other that they would miss me and the other GB runners.

USA with Scott, Anton and Susan, who was the current world record holder for the 100k, would also be strong contenders not only for the individual medals but for the team prize where all three counted. Their great rivals Canada were missing their star runner due to injury but a team fielding Owen, Ethan and Hannah would be a match for anyone. Other nations had their runners too but the accepted wisdom was that the winners would come from Ethiopia, Kenya, Australia, USA, Canada and GB.

I was pulled out of my own little world when the announcer said, 'From GB ... Rebekah Park' The GB supporters shouted for all they were worth and I turned and gave them a wave which brought another cheer. My team mates Marc and Alix were greeted with a similar cheer and we all looked at each and knew that this is it. We gave each other a final hug and wished each other all the best. Marc told me not to leave anything behind but to trust the work I'd done and enjoy the race.

Over the past two years I'd got to know Marc well. We'd raced with each, against each other and ran many miles in training. Our families knew each other and it seemed we'd been friends all our lives. Marc had grown up within the world of ultra running. In fact his mum had run an ultra race when she was 10weeks pregnant with Marc not realising it at the time. So Marc had run his first ultra even before he was born! I suppose there was little doubt that he would end up running but his parents never forced him, just gave him all the encouragement he needed. I knew they would be in the crowd as proud as proud could be.

Over the last two years I'd grown to really like Marc and wondered if there was more to our relationship than training partners and friends but we'd both been so single minded in preparing for this race that nothing was said. Now was certainly not the time to think about it. We both had a race to run and we needed to give all our attention to run to our potential.

On your marks, set, BANG ... we were off on the first of our ten 10k loops around the city of Addis Ababa. The route took us once around the track, then out on the streets. I had run the route each day over the two weeks I'd been with the team. I knew each road, each turning. I could lie in bed at night and I did and imagine the route and where I needed to be at each stage.

There were two small inclines on the loop which when fresh seemed hardly noticeable but I knew after 70k or so would seem like Mt Everest. There weren't too many twists and turns and so I anticipated that a fast time was possible with the possibility of the world record being broken. I also felt that I was along with several others was capable of breaking it but it would all depend on the day. Who would be the strongest? Who would have the confidence to run their own race?

The one thing I hadn't anticipated on my daily training runs around the route was the crowds. If I thought the crowds inside the stadium were loud then the crowds outside were mega loud. Every single space around the whole 10k was taken with some areas 10-15 people deep. There was bands and dancers every kilometre or so. This was turning into a national party.

For the average Ethiopian the ticket prices for the stadium were out of their reach but this was one event they could watch for free and to have Ethiopian athletes competing against Kenya and all the other nations was such a source of pride that they were going to play their part.

As soon as we came out of the stadium we were hit by a wall of noise that didn't abate for the rest of the day. I somehow blocked it out and got into my own little world of running. I couldn't win the race in the first lap but I could certainly lose it if I went off too hard.

Chapter 3

First 2 laps

I'd spent many hours discussing with my coach the best plan of action for the race. We knew that many, even experienced runners would get caught up with the excitement of the crowd and the atmosphere and go off too quickly.

In our discussions we felt that the winning time might well be under 6hrs 30mins which was just over 7mins faster than my pb (personal best) of last year. So I trained with the aim of running at an average of 3mins 54secs per kilometre. That worked out at 39mins per 10k loop.

I briefly thought back to my first ever 10k aged 12 when I was so pleased with myself for running under an hour. Now here I am contemplating running ten 10k's back to back in 39mins each! I've come a long way in 14 years and I have so many people to thank for helping me.

So I was determined not to run that first loop quicker than 39mins. That would give me the best start and would mean that I hadn't got into oxygen debt and its resultant lactic acid that is so deadly to the legs.

It's good to have a plan but it's so hard to keep to it especially when after a mere 3k I find myself in 15th position and can only just see the leading group a distance ahead. They must be running at least 3.40 pace. I quickly do the maths in my head and realise that at that pace they would do the 100k in just over 6hrs 6mins. I know that this is impossible but still I'm full of doubts. Are my race and my goal of a medal already finished so early in the race?

Thankfully Anton from the USA draws alongside and says in his casual Texan brawl, 'What a load of idiots they are! Don't you worry Becky we'll be seeing them again soon enough.' Marc was ahead and I was concerned that maybe he was one of the idiots but time would tell. We continue to run side by side not talking but helping each other to find the rhythm that we will need to maintain for the next 6hrs. I gain strength from this pace and start to relax, taking in the scene around me.

By the time I arrived back at the stadium for the first time I'm in 13th place and the clock shows 38mins 50secs. A few seconds quick but no real damage done. I set out on the second loop a few metres behind Anton (USA), Libby and Greg (Australia). I'm told that the third member of our GB team Alix is not far behind.

I'm prepared for the crowd now both inside the stadium and outside on the route. The Kenyans and Ethiopians are near the front but they are too sensible to be setting the pace at this early stage. It seems there a couple of runners from Mozambique who are out to make a name for themselves. The rumour is they will pull out at 50k so even more reason not to go with them.

I add to my memory of the loop where people are. The lively Africa band at the 3k mark, the group of GB supporters just before the 5k mark, a number of my Uni friends who went wild the first time I passed them at the 8k mark.

I settle down and concentrate on my technique. I can feel every movement of my feet as I'm running barefoot. Over 80% of the field are running without any shoes and those who are wearing shoes have on very minimal footwear. Over the last 30 years attitudes have changed dramatically. My coach told me the history of the running shoe and how things have turned full circle in the last 80 years.

Before the 1980's everyone who ran did so in very basic training shoes which provided very little support and cushioning. There was nothing else available so no one thought any different. Then along came Nike and other shoe manufacturers who started developing a totally different type of shoe with lots of support at the heel of the shoe.

Over the next 30 years the shoes became more and more complicated and expensive. Sadly though runners became more and more injured due to the unnatural heel strike that the new shoes encouraged. It was not uncommon for runners to be picking up injuries regularly. The shoe manufacturers responded by making even more expensive shoes with even more support at the heel.

In the late 1990's and early 2000's a small movement started with the publication of a few books that encouraged runners to work on their technique. 'The Pose Method' of running and 'ChiRunning' taught runners to land on their front or mid foot as being the more natural way to run. Their argument was that if you ran barefoot on the sand or grass you would naturally land on the front or on your mid foot. You would never stride out and land on your heel as there is no natural protection on that part of your foot.

Then in 2009 Chris McDougall wrote his best selling book, 'Born to Run' where he recounted meeting the Tarahumara tribe of New Mexico. Here was a tribe who ran for miles and miles kicking and chasing a wooden ball with nothing more than a pair of sandals. This book encouraged more and more runners to experiment with barefoot running and many found that injuries they previously struggled with disappeared.

A company Vibram FiveFingers developed a new type of running shoes which gave some protection to the foot for running on rocky and uneven ground but still allowed the foot to feel the ground and run naturally.

By the time I really started running in the mid 2020's so many papers had been researched and published showing the benefits of barefoot or minimal shoe running that the vast majority of runners ran barefoot or using Vibram's latest minimal shoe 'The slipper.'

As soon as I had shown an interest in running my coach encouraged me to run barefoot. I started on the grass and softer ground and as soon as my feet were strong enough I was on the road and paths. Many cities and towns in the UK are developing running paths which are made of a softer material so people could run barefoot. They are being well maintained and a national campaign is encouraging young and old to run naturally. This will hopefully have a massive benefit to the health of the nation meaning that limited NHS resources can be used most effectively for treating the most serious of illnesses.

On the 10k loop there is only one short section where I need to be careful running barefoot but the advantages of running barefoot outweigh that slight disadvantage. The second loop passes soon enough and I've caught another couple of runners who were paying the price for their early pace.

I'm running just behind Libby and Greg who are working together. Anton slowly increased his pace over the second lap and caught up with a group just ahead which included Marc and two of the Kenyan's Karega and Pili.

I was content with running my own race and when I went through the stadium for the 2nd time and saw my time 38.42 I was even happier. My support team had my energy ready to grab and drink on the way.

Our GB team had a dedicated group of doctors and intuitionists who had spent the last few years researching all the available data and evidence on the best way to fuel a runner for a 100k race. As a team we had experimented with their findings and we now found a special formula that gave just the right amount of carbohydrates and protein in a form that the body could quickly and easily digest. Our plan was to take a 500ml drink of this special formula every lap and then just take water on board when we felt we needed it. All this was carefully monitored by our support team. This really was a team effort.

Chapter 4

3rd and 4th laps

I felt I was really into the race now. I'd been running for over 1hr 20mins and I was running within myself but keeping up the pace. The crowds continued to cheer our every foot step but I was now blocking them out and concentrating hard on running my own race.

I've talked to many runners and asked them what they think about as they run. The answers always amaze me as there are as many answers as runners. Some like to get away from the running in their minds and think of all sorts of other things. Others spend all the time thinking of the race, their pace and how they can go quicker.

I love Maths and so spend part of the run calculating in my mind my current pace and my projected finishing time. I work out if I increase my pace by 5 seconds a kilometre when will I finish? If I keep going at this pace for the next 20k and then increase by 2 seconds every 5k what time will I finish? Sometimes the numbers make my head hurt but it helps the time pass. It is also a good indicator of how tired I'm getting as even simple sums take longer when I'm struggling.

I know that after 20k I'm ahead of my goal of 6hrs 30mins. There is still a long way to go and much can happen but I'm confident that I've given myself a good chance. As I run I give myself a mental MOT. I start with my head and work down. Head – fine, I'm concentrating and feel positive. I know I'm not as far up the field as I'd hoped but I'm still in contention. Shoulders – relaxed and not wasting any energy by being tense. Arms – again relaxed with a low swing. Stomach – no problems. I'm drinking when I need to and eating a jelly baby every 10mins or so. Legs – No signs of pain or fatigue anywhere. Feet – coping well, no hot spots where blisters might form. I'd not resorted to having my toe nails surgically removed like some runners but they weren't giving me any problems.

During this third lap I set myself the target of trying to catch at least one more runner. Libby and Greg continue to set the pace but the three of us slowly start catching the runner ahead. I look ahead and notice when they go past a banner at the side of the road. I count my breaths until I reach the same point. 12 breaths. I run for another 5 minutes and then repeat the process with a marshal on the course. This time it's only 7 breathes so I know I'm catching.

I do this 2 more times until I catch the runner and go past. We exchange a quick greeting. Even though we are racing hard against each other there is time to encourage and support one another. He's going through a tough bit and I'm feeling good but things change very quickly and he may well catch me again and I'll try and hang on to him.

I run around the final bend of the loop and see the stadium ahead. I can hear more massive cheers and assume that one of the Ethiopians has taken the lead. I calculate I must be about 2mins behind the leaders. At this pace it's a long way but we are not quite a third of the way through the race yet so not insurmountable.

I enter the stadium and immediately hear the GB supporters shouting my name, 'Go Becky Go.' I feel a lump in my throat that all these people have made the effort to come and support me and the whole GB team. It makes me feel so proud but I ignore them, hoping that they'll realise I'm in a race and can't afford to waste energy to wave back. There'll be plenty of time for that after the race is over.

I go through the 30k mark in 1hr 55mins 47secs at an average pace of 3mins 52secs per kilometre. I'm slightly ahead of my 6hr 30min goal but everything feels okay so I stay with it. I take another of my special energy drinks and I'm off and out of the stadium once more for my 4th lap.

I glance at my Garmin 807xl, press a button and immediately the information I've programmed into the watch is relayed to my ear piece. Garmin have been making gps watches for many years and they have become a favourite with runners, walkers, triathletes, sailors and generally anyone who enjoys being out in the open.

Initially they were fairly basic recording distance run, average pace, heart rate and a facility to point you in the right direction but the latest generation of Garmin watches has taken the technology to another level. Now they not only do all the basic things that a runner wants but it also is able to keep track of what is happening in the body.

Lactic acid levels, muscle breakdown, whether you are running aerobically or anaerobically and all sorts of really helpful information. The other really helpful advance is the ability to send the information you need via Bluetooth to a tiny ear piece. The runner can set the watch to relay

which information they want every 30mins or whenever. This means those who can't read the figures on the watch can still obtain the information.

Personally I set mine to when I press the function button it sends me my current pace, my average pace and my lactic acid level. From those three pieces of information I can get an accurate sense of how I'm doing. The same information is also relayed to my coaching team at the stadium so they are able to monitor how I'm doing throughout the race.

A few years ago there was a lot of debate about whether these should be banned in competition. Ipods and similar music players were banned a number of years ago as they caused a number of accidents in races when runners were listening to music and didn't hear cars approaching. Personally I never use them as I enjoy the solitude of being out in the countryside running.

The debate about Garmins rumbled on for a few years but in the end it was decided that as there wasn't a constant noise and tests showed that runners could still hear traffic runners were allowed to use them.

I don't feel dependant on mine but I do check it every now and then to make sure I'm on target. I decided that I needed to push the pace a bit and try and catch a group of runners who were no more than 30seconds ahead. I tried to imagine they were on the end of a long rope and I was pulling them in. They were getting closer and closer until eventually I drew alongside.

Initially I thought I would go past and push on but once I caught them I decided to stay with them and let them pull me along for the rest of the loop. I'd been running on my own for a while so it felt good to be able to match the stride of others and draw from them.

There are disadvantages and advantages to running a 10k loop ten times. One main advantage is knowing exactly what is coming next. It's surprising how important this is in a long race. There are 1k markers all over the route but even without those I know I have one more slight left hand bend and one slight incline into the stadium and so I continue to push on and get in front of the group of four I've been running with.

I enter the stadium about 5 strides ahead of the chasing pack and it gives me a lift when I imagine what the crowd must be thinking. I've moved into 7th with a lap time of 38mins 47secs. I feel like a metronome churning out 3.52 kilometres one after another.

I have one more lap to reach the magical half way point. Psychologically it is so good to reach that milestone. If you can get there feeling good then it's even better.

Chapter 5

5th and 6th laps

One of the reasons that the 100k has grown in popularity with the public is the advances in TV technology. The Olympic Stadium at Addis Ababa has the most advanced system in the world. Every seat has a small plasma TV in front of them. This means that the spectator can watch the action live and then watch repeats of the action again and again. It is a touch screen so they can choose what they watch and when.

During the 100k race spectators are able to watch the race unfold on their screens. Once the athletes have left the stadium for their 10k lap they can follow the runners until they appear again

in front of them. The other clever thing is that you can choose which runner you want to follow. For example if someone wants to follow me all they do is type in my number and the screen will show me running. If they want to see the leaders they can. Some of the more advanced systems have split screens so you can follow the leaders and your favourite!

As I left the stadium for my 5th lap I was aware that my support team would be following my every step, looking for signs of fatigue or weakness. In a strange way this gave me a boost. I knew there was no where to hide. I had to keep it going and work hard. If I wanted to win a medal then I needed to concentrate for the whole race.

I went through my mental check list, head, shoulders, stomach, legs and feet. I was starting to feel the effects of running for over 40k. It is almost a marathon but I knew I had plenty left and was going to need every bit of energy I had.

One of the things that helped was the constant support I was receiving on each lap. I recognised faces as I passed them and tried to smile as much as I could. Sometimes the same people would shout the same thing and each time it would make me smile. For example one Scots guy would shout 'Go get em girl' each time I passed.

More often than not ultra running is a lonely sport where you only see spectators or your support crew every couple of hours but this race is so different. You are constantly running through people and they seem to sense when you're having a hard time and cheer you on even more.

I was definitely digging in on this lap but so were other runners and I was slowly catching those in front. The Mozambique runners had dropped out before the 50k mark. By the time I entered the stadium for the end of the 5th lap I was in 6th place and the giant score board showed

1. Abrihet (Ethiopia) 3hrs 12mins 42secs
2. Makena (Kenya) 3hrs 12mins 43secs
3. Karega (Kenya) 3hrs 13mins 31secs
4. Pili (Kenya) 3hrs 13mins 32secs
5. Marc (GB) 3hrs 13mins 52secs
6. Rebekah (GB) 3hrs 14mins 13secs

Once I'd taken my drink and replenished my pockets with jelly babies and was off for the second half of the race the following runners came through

7. Hagos (Ethiopia) 3hrs 14mins 50secs
8. Lebna (Ethiopia) 3hrs 14mins 51secs
9. Libby (Australia) 3hrs 15mins 12secs
10. Greg (Australia) 3hrs 15mins 25secs
11. Anton (USA) 3hrs 16mins 13secs
12. Scott (USA) 3hrs 17mins 41secs

The race was really getting going now. It seems strange to think that we've been running for over 3hrs but now it was getting real. The early pace had settled down and everyone was working hard concentrating to make sure they didn't lose touch. One lack of concentration now could be vital. The margin for error was being reduced by the minute.

I decided to make this 6th lap a consolidation lap. I wasn't going to push and try and catch those ahead but equally I didn't want those behind to take advantage. I requested information from my Garmin more often as I was running on my own with a few ahead and others behind.

In some ways it was a lonely lap but with the thousands lining the streets I was never really alone. Each lap the highlight was going past my Uni friends at the 8k mark. They had made banners and were all dressed up in fancy dress. I could hear them well before I could see them. They had drums and all sorts of musical instruments and had even made up some songs to inspire me and inspire me they did.

I tried to make a conscious effort every time I went past to look good and I even made the effort to wave once in a while to them which only resulted in the volume going up even more. They will all have very sore throats by the end of the race.

The 6th lap was completed as once again I entered the stadium. The goal of consolidation was accomplished. I'd slipped a few seconds further behind Marc but the group behind me hadn't gained any time so I was happy with that.

60k gone 40k to go The next few hours were going to be the toughest yet most exciting of my life and I started thinking about why I run and why am I putting myself through this!

Chapter 6

7th & 8th laps

I think I was always meant to be a runner. I was born on Sunday 3rd August 2014 at 11.17am just at the moment that the Women's Marathon at the Glasgow Commonwealth Games was finishing. Not that I knew that at the time of course.

I grew up in a family where running was a central part of our lives and I always enjoyed the sensation of running. When I went to Primary School our Head Teacher, Mrs. Marsh, who with her husband, were very keen ultra marathon runners, encouraged all those in her school to run and aim high. At the front of the assembly hall she had a big banner which read, *'Winning is being better today than you were yesterday, every day!'* which she explained was a quote from a famous English Athletics coach.

Every assembly I looked at that quote and I decided I would make that my goal in life. I realized it didn't really matter whether I was better than anyone else winning was going to be me being better than yesterday. It is a motto that has helped me achieve all I have so far.

Mrs. Marsh organised all sorts of sports events in the school and I loved every one of them but it was when we started running that I showed the most potential. I remember the first time we had to run a mile as part of a fun event organised by our Active Schools Coordinator most of my class didn't manage to run the whole way whereas I was at the front and even the boys couldn't keep up with me. From that day on whenever the school needed a runner for a competition I was the girl.

I continued to run in my secondary school, joined my local Athletics Club and continued to improve year on year. My favourite event was always the cross country. I took part in track and field during the summer but I loved it when September arrived and the start of the cross country season. There was always something special about being in the open countryside, with the grass and mud between my feet and the sensation of being free to run wherever I wanted.

I progressed through various levels, particularly in cross country and was picked to represent Scotland and then GB at international events winning some of them. I continued to run through my University days and moved up to running Marathons and then Ultra Marathons in my early twenties.

It was when I started running more than 30miles that I felt I came into my own. My Marathon pb was 2hrs 39mins 13secs but whereas others at that pace couldn't run another step I was ready to go again. It was fortunate that as I found my distance, ultra running was going through a boom and there was plenty of sponsorship and good prize money around. I made the decision after University to become a full time runner and see where it would take me.

I had two major companies who were willing to sponsor me and Team GB provided all my travel costs and access to physiotherapists, medical and anything else I needed to succeed. I really did feel part of a team who were committed to helping me become the best runner I could. My performances year on year continued to improve until I was ranked in the top 5 for the 100k and I regularly finished in the top 3 in the major ultra races throughout the world.

I felt I'd come a long way from my home in Scotland and I was determined to bring success to all those who supported and backed me along the way.

I was pulled out of my reminiscing when Hagos and Lebna, the duo from Ethiopia, pulled along side me half way round the 6th lap. I looked across at them and thought they look a lot stronger than I feel. I accepted the fact that they were going to go past me and I was resigning myself to losing a couple of places and realistically any chance of a medal.

For the next 10mins I ran behind them, not quite close enough to feel I was with them but not too far away to accept I'd lost them. It was then that I gave myself a good talking to. I'd not come all this way both geographically and in my career to meekly accept defeat with over 30k still to go. I told myself that I was in good shape, that I had done the training, that my race plan was solid so stop feeling sorry for myself and get with them.

So much of ultra running is in the mind. Yes you need to be fit and have done the miles but the thing that makes the difference between two equally matched ultra marathon runners is in their mind. Who can cope best with the distances and the times of struggle we all go through? I'd always prided myself on my positive attitude, my never say die commitment. Well now was the time I needed to show it.

I decided to just concentrate on the shorts of Hagos in front. Nothing else mattered for the next 20mins as I set myself the goal of getting back with them and even in front by the time we reached the stadium for the 7th time. I blocked everything else out, the crowd, even my Uni friends, the pain I was feeling. The only goal was to get back with the two Ethiopians ahead.

The funny thing is once your mind accepts the fact that you are not quitting you feel better and stronger and within 5-10mins I was back on track. I caught Hagos and Lebna and much to their annoyance went past them and opened up a sizeable lead. I knew that if I could push on it would have a negative effect on them and I wanted to make the most of this renewed strength.

By the time I came into the stadium to complete lap 7 I was further ahead of them than at the start of the lap and also I was closing down on Pili from Kenya who was really struggling. Marc had gone past him and was now just over 30secs ahead.

As I went through the checkpoint Team GB were encouraging me to work hard on this next lap and try and catch up with Marc so we could help each other over the last couple of laps. 'Work harder' I thought What do they think I've been doing???

'Work harder, work harder, work harder' was running through my mind as I set off on the 8th lap. Often when I run I like to have motivational chants to keep me going. My coach passed on some of his favourites over the years such as, 'Slow and steady make it last,' 'Tough times don't last, tough people do,' and 'Pain is temporary, Failure lasts for ever.'

Whatever it takes to get there. As I've mentioned the mind plays such a key part in ultra races and I knew I'd need to use all my tricks to keep the pace high.

I didn't look back as I didn't want those following to think I was worried about them but I could sense that they were not on my heels. Instead I concentrated on trying to catch Marc. I thought he must be finding it tough by now after his early pace. Also I knew he was concerned with how much training he'd done in the last two months leading up to this race. The fine line between being well prepared and over trained is precariously narrow and I know Marc was concerned he'd over stepped the mark.

The thing is you never know what's in the core of your legs until you have run the first 30-40k and then it's too late. I slowly but surely caught up with Marc once I came alongside we agreed to work together and support one another. We could see that Kerega and Pili were working together in joint 3rd place and it would make sense for us to help each other. Marc and I are good friends and so we didn't need to talk much. We both knew what needed to be done and we settled into a pattern of one then the other taking the lead and keeping the pace solid.

It was so good to be running with someone I knew and for a moment or two I thought we were out on one of our training runs but not for long as we don't often have thousands of people watching us when we train! The crowds were now enjoying their lunch and were offering us plenty to eat on the way round. Tempting as it was I don't think my stomach could have handled any solid food. I was doing well drinking enough water and chewing on my jelly babies.

As we went past my Uni friends they bust into song, 'Here comes the bride' as they reckoned there was more going on between Marc and I than 'just good friends.' Marc asked 'why did they sing that?' and I muttered something about a private joke. He thankfully didn't ask anymore questions as we both needed to concentrate on the last 20k that was to come.

We entered the stadium for the 8th time just 20seconds behind the Kenyan duo and just over a minute behind the leader Abrihet, the local favourite from Ethiopia and Makena from Kenya.

Marc and I were in 5th and 6th places with just 20k to go. So near yet so far.

Chapter 7

9th Lap

Lap 9 was always going to be the tough one. Dez Trigg in his awarding winning book in 2015 after he won the prodigious Western States 100 race wrote about the 80% rule. Dez reckons that in any race the 80% distance is the hardest. You have done most of the work but there is still 20% to go. In the 10k race once you get to 8k the next 1k can be the hardest before the final 1k push to the finish. In a 100mile race the same rule applies, the 80-90 mile section can be the toughest of the whole race.

In this 100k race the 80-90k loop was going to be the hardest. Marc and I were in a good position, chasing the leading four runners and having pulled away from those behind us. Knowing that this lap was going to be the one that could make the difference to the whole race we had trained specifically for it. Over the past two years every single training run and race we pushed ourselves harder during that 80-90% of the distance. I remember one training run recently where Marc & I were doing a 10mile tempo run. We'd been pushing hard at 5.45 pace for the first 8miles, the end was in sight but we raised the pace even more for the 9th mile. I remember Marc commented at the time, 'That was for the Olympic Games' and now here we were ready to attack on the 9th lap.

We were fully prepared to attack at the very point that everyone else was struggling and attack we did. Without saying anything we both increased to the pace. I don't know about Marc but it was hurting me. I didn't need to do a mental check list as everything hurt but my body responded to the extra effort as I hoped it would after all those specific training sessions.

I needed to concentrate and not allow my mind to wander so I resorted to a tactic my coach had taught me and I'd used many times. Count my breaths. So I counted to 100 and to 100 again and again. Each time it helped pass another few minutes.

Karega and Pili must have upped their pace as well as it took 4k before we reeled them in. It was such a good feeling to finally catch them up and go past. We were now in 3rd and 4th places but we were not satisfied with that.

We continued to push on, if anything raising the pace once more. Makena in 2nd place had slipped further back from Abrihet, who was leading. We could see she was rolling a bit from side to side and it didn't surprise us that we quickly caught her and went past.

Everything was going to plan. The 9th lap was proving decisive but we knew with the home support we really needed to catch the local favourite Abrihet. She was running strong and getting amazing support from the home crowd. But there is only so much supporters can do and Abrihet had been running on her own for the last few laps and was finding it hard to maintain her form and pace.

Ever so slowly we drew her in and just after the 6k mark we caught her and to the gasps in the crowd went past. Marc and I were now leading the 100k Olympic race. We had about 14k to go. Less than 1hr of running.

On our training runs we had discussed all sorts of scenarios of what might happen and what our tactics should be. In every scenario it was agreed that should we be in a situation where we together with a lap or so to go then it would be every man and women for himself. We would help

each other as far as we could but at the end of the day we were competing against each other as well.

I knew that Marc had a better finishing pace than me. It's hard to describe it as a sprint finish at the end of a 100k race but I felt that if we were together with just 1k to go he was favourite. So I decided to make my move a lot further out. I sensed that Marc was planning to ease off just a little once we hit the front so I decided to take advantage and push on.

I got a metre ahead, then another, then it was five and by the time I went past my screaming-with-delight Uni friends I opened a 20metre gap which could be decisive. I was definitely in the zone. I felt I was looking down at myself as I ran and nothing else mattered but finishing the last lap and achieving my wildest dream – an Olympic gold medal.

I entered the stadium and even though the home crowd were really disappointed to see me then Marc rather than their heroine Abrihet they recognised the fighting qualities I'd shown to get to the front and still cheered me on. Obviously the GB crowd made up for any lack of noise from the home crowd by doubling all their previous efforts.

It was an incredible feeling to be running through the stadium for the last time. Just one more lap to go. Leading the biggest race of my life. Everything had gone to plan. Surely nothing could go wrong.

Chapter 8

9th lap

I continued to push on for the next couple of kilometres. Even though I refused to look back the crowd were telling me that Marc was not catching me, that I was going to win and they cheered my every step.

A few times my mind started to wander and I could picture myself at the finish line breaking through the tape and the commentator screaming my name. I could imagine my family jumping up and down with excitement. I sensed tears welling up in my eyes at the thought of achieving my goal and what it would mean to me and all those who have supported and helped me.

Then suddenly out of nowhere the unthinkable happened I tripped.

I don't know what happened. One moment I was flying along leading the 100k Olympic race with less than 7k to go, the next I'm heading for the ground.

At that split second before I crashed into the pavement my whole life flashed before my eyes. One person stood out – my coach who I know far better as my grandad.

Chapter 9

My grandad

There is one thing you know about my grandad and that is he loves to run. He has been running all his life and even now at 81 he still likes to put on his running gear and hit the roads or more likely the trails.

Nanny and grandad have been such an important part of my life. They are my mum's parents and form the rock for our extended family. My Mum had three sisters, older twins and one younger. They are all married now with their own children but remarkably I'm the only granddaughter. I was the first granddaughter and it looked as though the family tradition was going to carry on but I have two brothers and all my cousins are boys – eight of them all together.

I'm told grandad told a story at my parents wedding, asking 'who is more content the man who has four daughters or the man who had 4 million pounds?' The answer is the man with four daughters as the man who has four million always wants more!!

So I suppose I was special in more ways than one! It also made me very tough as whenever we got together with all my aunts, uncles and their families I had to be tough or I wouldn't survive. We all loved going to nanny and grandads. Nanny cooked the most amazing meals and grandad always had time to play with us.

Running was such a central part of our family life. We spent weekends supporting grandad on his latest West Highland Way Race or other ultra runs. It became a family joke that whenever grandad meet anyone we timed how long it would take before he was talking about whw. For years I didn't know what those letters stood for. I just knew whw and grandad went together.

My mum told me that her and her sisters used to warn friends, especially boy friends, not to ask their dad about the whw otherwise they would be there for ever. The worse mistake to make was to ask a second question as he took that as a sign they were interested and talked for even longer.

In my grandparents house was a special room where grandad kept all his running files, medals and awards. He had a wall full of box files with all the years on them. They went back all the way to 1975 when he started running. There was a box file for every year and in that box were all the races he ran in that year. He kept all his race numbers, maps, results and everything else.

My favourite things though were his medals and other awards for his races. When I was a little girl I used to love dressing up with all the medals. I would imagine they were a special dress that clinked as I walked along. There was one cabinet that none of us were allowed to touch or even lean against. That was his collection of goblets from the whw race. Each year if you finish the 95mile race under 35hours you were given a crystal goblet. Grandad had loads of them and I didn't realise their significance until I was older.

As I grew older I began to realise that every one of those medals, certificates and goblets had a story and whereas my brothers and cousins didn't seem interested I loved to sit with my grandad and I'd ask him about the various races he ran in and what they were like.

From the age of 8 when I really started running and found I was good at it my grandad encouraged and helped me. As I improved and was competing at various levels he started to coach me and even though I have other coaches now I still talk to my grandad and never do anything without running it past him first.

He hasn't been too well recently and so wasn't able to travel to Ethiopia. One summer after my exams I read through my grandads blog which he started in 2006 to record his first attempt at the whw. For 34 years he has recorded every single training session he has run, every race he has taken part in and tried to offer advice and tips along the way.

His blog has received well over one million hits and continues to be a source of help to many people wanting to run ultras. Nowadays blogs are seen as a thing of the past with all the new technology but grandad likes the old ways and will continue to keep his blog going for as long as he is still moving.

The blog also gives an account of his life and our family along the way. That summer I read about my parents wedding and watched his wedding speech. I read about how he cried the first time he saw me when I was born. Plus all sorts of issues that were raised and discussed along the way. It really is far more than just a running blog. It took me most of the summer to read through but it gave me an insight into my grandad that I never had before.

After that summer whenever I was with my grandad I'd ask him about various races and loved to sit and listen to him retelling story after story. Nanny used to tell him off for boring me but he didn't because I was like a sponge wanting to learn as much as I could about running and particularly ultra running. It was listening to my grandad that gave me the inspiration to focus on ultra races myself. To believe and have the confidence to run them myself.

Chapter 10

Cleveland Hike – June 1975

One the first races grandad told me about was when he was 16yrs old. I was the same age at the time he first told me this story and so it stuck in my mind. I can picture him now holding the badge they were all given for finishing the hike and telling me the story

'I joined the 16th Liverpool Boys Brigade when I was 13 years old and loved being involved in all the sports. We played Football, Cricket, ran cross country and track and field and because the competition wasn't as high as school events I won a lot which always helps you to keep going.

Every summer at the end of June there was a big event called 'The Cleveland Hike.' When I first joined the BB I didn't know too much about it but over the first couple of years I discovered that it was a two day hike with a difference in the North Yorkshire Moors. There were over 150 three man teams from all over the country taking part. The teams would hike for between 25-30miles over the two days in a series of legs using a maps and compass.

Each team had to carry all they needed for the two day hike – clothes, tent, food etc. The teams were set off at regular intervals having being given a map reference for the next checkpoint. The team is given a time limit to get there. If you arrived early you didn't get any more points but for every minute you were late you lost a point. So the idea was to make sure you arrived a few minutes early without wasting too much energy. But whatever you did it was vital you didn't get lost or you would lose vital points.

The difference bit was that at each checkpoint there was a task to perform were you could gain points. At some check points it would be a mental test such as a general knowledge quiz or a map reading exercise. Other checkpoints would have a medical aspect to them. For example you had to imagine one of your team had broken his leg. What would you do to get him off the mountain?

Then at other checkpoints it would be an obstacle course when it was the fastest relay team with each member going one at a time or were two of the team had to carry the third member over the set course.

Each year the competition was won by companies from East Kilbride. They owned the event and had won it for the past 15 years. It wouldn't be unusual for 6th East Kilbride to take the top three places with their A, B and C teams. The odd year that they lost a team from West Kilbride won but they took it as a personal insult.

The two years before I took part 16th Liverpool did okay finishing 41st and then 22nd but we were determined to do better in 1975. The problem that we had was that there were two strong, fits 19yrs olds Graham and Pete but the third member of the team couldn't really keep up with them. To have any chance of winning it was vital to have three team members who could keep going at the same pace.

Over a number of training weekends the officers of our company tried out different people but nothing seemed to fit together. Initially I was going to be in the B team with the idea of moving up to the A team in the next year or so. Then one of the officers had a bright idea. He started thinking outside the box. He realised that I could keep up with the older two boys on training runs without any gear but that at as a 16 yr old I wasn't strong enough to carry an equal weighted rucksack.

So that is when they thought out of the box. They realised that I could carry a smaller rucksack and the other two older boys could carry most of the gear between them. Once we'd saw that would work we also recognised that there would be an advantage on the tasks at the checkpoints especially those that involved two members of the team carrying the third. Teams would often struggle to carry someone of their own size but it would be a lot easier for Graham and Pete to carry me.

At the end of the training weekend the officer took me aside and explained their decision that I would now be on the A team with Graham and Pete. I felt ten feet tall and couldn't believe that they thought I was good enough. For the next 2 months before the event I ran and ran and made sure I was in good shape. I didn't want to let them down.

We had two more training weekends when we walked for miles with the gear we would be carrying. Graham and Pete were relieved to see I could keep up with them and we started to think we might just have a chance after all.

I remember meeting up at Pete's house before we left. We had one more check though all our gear. If you didn't have the right equipment you would not be allowed to start. We tried to cut down the weight of our rucksacks as much as we could. We had a 2 man tent rather than the bigger 3 man tent. We figured that we could squeeze into a smaller tent for one night.

We drove over to the North Yorkshire Moors on the Friday afternoon in time for the Saturday morning start. I remember the officers giving stick to one of the other officers about his car. He had bought a new Fort Capri that were all the age but he didn't realise it had a 5th gear which was new in those days. So he drove all the way in 4th when it would be been a lot quicker and smoother in 5th.

When we arrived at the camp site there were tents everywhere to be seen and I started to feel really nervous. What had I got myself into? I desperately wanted to do well and I even more desperately didn't want to let Graham and Pete down as this would be the last year they could compete as they would be too old next year. It was now or never and I knew they were relying on me to keep up and play my part.

I didn't sleep that well but woke early the next morning ready to get going. The start was drawn in a ballot and we were due off at 8.46am. The first team was away at 7am and then last at 9.30am. There was a minute gap between each team. You could follow another team but if they got lost so did you so it was always better to trust your own map reading skills.

We watched the first teams head off as we ate our breakfast and it seemed to take ages before it was our turn to enter the start area, have our bags checked, receive our race score booklet and the grid reference for the first checkpoint. All the favourites were out on the course and no-one really took much notice of us. No company from Liverpool had ever remotely looked liked winning in the past and why would we be any different?

It felt strange to finally be going after all the weeks of preparation and the last few hours of hanging around. The first checkpoint was 3 miles away and we were given 50mins to get there. No real problems as long as we didn't get lost. After half a mile we face the first decision as we came to a t-junction. Several teams had gone left but we checked and rechecked the map and it was definitely right so trusted our judgement and carried on. Maybe the first checkpoint wasn't going to be as easy as I first thought.

We were right and we found the first checkpoint with 7mins to spare. The task at this checkpoint was a quiz and we were given 10mins to complete the 20 questions. Most of them were straight forward but we disagreed on a couple and had to go with the majority.

Once we'd completed the quiz we were off again. This time it was a longer leg of 9miles and we had 2hrs 15mins to get there. We looked at the map and realised we had a choice of going a longer way around a mountain or a path which would take us over and down but would be a lot quicker. We opted for the direct route but could see that a number of teams were taking the low level longer way.

We arrived in time at the second checkpoint and we were happy to see the marshal write a big 0 in our points column. We wanted to keep away from any negative numbers as we knew that the winning teams didn't lose points on the legs.

The next task was an obstacle course. It was about half a mile long and we had to complete it as a team. There were wooden walls to climb over, nets to crawl through and a submerged tunnel full of water. At the end you had to hold your breath and go for it. We worked well as a team and completed the course in just under 6mins. Due to the way the competition is run you have no idea how well you are doing. You know if you lose time points but on the tasks you don't know whether your time is good compared to other teams. All you can do is try your best.

The 3rd leg was straight forward and we were well within time. Some of the teams we saw resting at the checkpoints looked as though they were having a hard time and we heard of one team that was over an hour late due to getting completely lost. We noted that they weren't one of the East Kilbride teams!

The final leg of the first day was 6miles and we were given a tougher 70 mins to get there. To do that we'd need to run part of the way and no doubt it was arranged to sort out the teams. By the start of the leg we'd been going for 12 miles and the organisers knew that teams would be tired. They wanted to see whether we could raise our pace and make it in time.

We decided to run for the first 3 miles and see where we were in relation to the time. Then we could ease off a bit or speed up if needed. I was feeling fine and the tactic of the older stronger boys having most of the gear really paid off. We reached the 3 mile mark in 30mins leaving us 40mins for the second 3 miles. We knew this was the final leg of the day and so kept going to arrive in 61 mins. We were 9mins early but it did turn a few heads when they saw us arrive looking good and ahead of time.

The final task of the first day was to see how quickly we could put up our tent and have our stove lit and water boiling. We were marked for speed, style and efficiency. We felt we did well but you can never know. We timed other teams doing the task and we didn't see anyone quicker than us.

It was very cramped in our 2 man tent especially as I was squashed in the middle but we had a decent sleep and had to up early for our 7.12am start the next day. This meant we were 12th team off. Over 20 teams had dropped out completely and another 15 were down to 2 man teams. We had no idea how well we were doing. We knew we hadn't dropped any time points and felt the tasks had gone well but how well we wouldn't know until the prize giving at 2pm.

The first leg on Sunday was a gentle opener followed by a medical type test where we had to bandage one of our team. This seemed to go well and we set off on the loner 8mile leg in good spirits. That didn't last too long as after a mile or so we took a wrong turn and ended up going over a mile the wrong way. Once we'd realised we had 2 choices ... retrace our steps and go the right way. Take a compass bearing across field and get back on the right route.

We knew that any chance we had of doing well would rest on the decision we made. I was for just heading across the field. I didn't fancy having to go back the way we came. Pete wanted to head back on the track and retrace our steps because he argued we would know where we were. Graham as the leader of our team listened to both of us and then made the decision to head back along the track. I wasn't particularly happy with this decision but being a lot younger I kept my thoughts to myself!

The problem was we had lost nearly 15mins and then another 15mins to get back to the point where we should have been. This meant that we couldn't walk but would have to run at a steady pace with our rucksacks to have any chance of getting to the checkpoint on time.

We pushed on taking turns at the front to keep going. We walked hard up the hills and ran everything else. As the miles ticked by we knew we had a chance but it was going to be so close. With about a mile to go it looked like we were going to lose our first time points but thankfully the last bit was all downhill and so we ran as hard as we could and arrived with 27 seconds to spare!

If we were hoping for an easy task at this check point we were badly mistaken. It was the dreaded obstacle course where you had to carry one of the team. Secretly I was quite happy as I was the one who would be carried. The course was a tough one with two steep, muddy up hills and plenty of gates and fences to climb over.

Thankfully we had to wait 20mins for our turn and this gave us a chance to catch our breath and get ready. We sensed that this could be the decisive task that could make the difference between challenging for the tops spots or not.

Graham and Pete were superb and really raised the game. They ran round the course like their lives depended on it and when we finished we could tell from the time keeper that it was fast run.

We could also see the other teams who had been watching us talking about us and pointing in our direction. Maybe we had a chance after all.

The final leg was a lot less stressful and we arrived at the final checkpoint without any real drama and well in time. The final checkpoint was a kit inspection. It seems that in previous years some teams had conveniently left tents, sleeping bags or cooking equipment behind at the overnight camp so for the final task we had to empty our rucksacks and show that we had carried every single piece of equipment with us the whole way. We heard later on that several teams lost a lot of points because they didn't have all the gear they started with.

Once our gear had been checked and we handed in our score book we were free to wander off, rest and wait the couple of hours for the prize giving. We knew we had done well but it is so hard to know how well as you just don't know what the other teams have done.

It was a lovely sunny afternoon and all the teams were sitting on the grassy bank, sloping up from the stage where all the prizes were set up. At 2pm with all the teams counted for the prize giving started. The tradition is that they start with the last placed team and then work their way all the way to the first place.

As 89 teams eventually finished it took a while. We felt we should be in the top 20 so tried to relax as much as we could. It got down to 50th place Then 40th then 30th and eventually to the top 20. We sat up now and with every place wondered whether it would be our turn to walk to the front and receive our prize. Our B team came 19th, a great performance but my heart almost stopped when he said 16th Liverpool and just about started again when he added B team. I was so wrapped up in my own team I'd forgotten they were still waiting too.

15th, 14th, 13th, 12th, 11th, 10th and still no call of 16th Liverpool Company A team. We were really pleased we'd made the top 10th but we all hoped we'd make at least the top 5. We got our wish as the places were called out.

But by the time it got to the top 3 we were convinced that they had missed us out. As much as we'd hoped to do well we didn't really expect to get anywhere near the top 3. 'In third place last year's runners up 4th West Kilbride 'A' team.' By now it was obvious who hadn't yet been called up and we could see all the East Kilbride teams looking around. They knew their A team was still to be called but who else was there. They didn't even look up at us and probably didn't even know we were still waiting. The tension was unbearable as the marshal announced 'In second place last year's winners, 6th East Kilbride A team.' Normally when the 2nd place is announced the team who knows they have won jumps up and down waiting for the formality of the announcement.

By this stage we were absolutely convinced they had somehow missed us out and we agreed that if we jumped up and shouted we'd won and then hadn't we'd look complete idiots so we kept quiet and waited.

Finally after the 6th East Kilbride A team had taken their prize and the applause the marshal slowly said, 'This year's winners of the BB Cleveland Hike for the first time in their history is the 16th Liverpool Company A Team.'

For the next few minutes everything went crazy. Graham, Pete and I just hugged and slapped each other on the back. The rest of our company including the officers were cheering and best of all the

rest of the crowd were on their feet applauding us. They too were enjoying the moment that someone other than East Kilbride won ... even if it was a team from Liverpool.'

The first time grandad told me that story I kept asking him, 'Did you win? Did you win?' he made me wait until he'd finished telling the story and even when he told me the story again and I knew the ending it was still exciting and I imagined what it must feel like to win a big race.

Chapter 10

Marathons

Another time when I visited nanny and grandad I sneaked into grandad's study and looked through his boxes between 1984 and 1987. I knew that this was when grandad ran a few marathons as I'd seen the medals but I didn't know the full story. I remember him telling me that he was desperate to try and beat 3hrs for the marathon.

I really wanted to know whether he had or not. I was half way through 1986 when in he came. I felt a bit guilty but he soon put me at ease and asked me what I was looking for. Did you ever beat 3hrs for the marathon grandad? It was then that I first understood the term 'negative split.'

It was almost like a right of passage in our family ... the time that you knew what a negative split was. I can honestly say after that conversation it felt like I'd grown up and entered this whole new world of running speak. It opened up a new world and I understood other terms such as Fartlek, interval training, anaerobic threshold, tempo runs, long slow runs and could follow conversations that runners have and know what they were talking about.

Grandad told me what happened during those years.

'I ran my first marathon in 1984, the year I met my wife – your nanny. I'd been training hard or what I thought was hard for about 12 weeks but I set off far too quick and by the time I got to 20 miles I was really struggling and had to walk for part of the way. It was such a hot day that when I stopped to get water at the station and threw it over me it just disappeared.

I staggered in just over 3hrs 15mins and from that moment on was determined to break that 3hr mark. My legs were sore for days afterwards. I looked like an old man hobbling down the road and don't even go there when I think about the pain of going down steps! I slowly recovered and then after a few weeks set about trying to run a marathon in under 3hrs.

I wasn't part of a club then and so relied on magazines and any articles I could find. I followed various training plans and over the next two years ran 5 more marathons. I got closer to the magic mark with one of them just 3mins away. Three minutes ... it seemed so close but in three minutes I could run almost half a mile and that is along way. I didn't always improve.

One time I decided to try and run two marathons just 6 weeks apart. I'd trained hard putting in some 100mile weeks and the first went well when I finished a hilly course in 3hrs 7mins. The second one was on a flatter course and I wondered if I could finally beat my 3hrs. I used a programme for running two marathons within 6 weeks I'd read about which recommended two weeks recovery, two weeks hard training then two weeks taper. I tried to follow the programme exactly but I caught a cold half way through the hard weeks and struggled to train at the required pace. I knew my heart rate was too high for the sessions I was doing. It would have been more

sensible to withdraw from the marathon but runners are not the most sensible of people especially when you've been training for a race and want to do it.

So I ran, convincing myself that I'd be alright, that somehow the effects of the cold would disappear and all my training would pay off. I had a couple of friends who were also aiming for a sub 3hrs so we arranged to meet 300 yards from the start on the right hand side. There were over 10,000 running so it was easy to meet up with people.

Right from the start I knew this was going to be hard but the pace was right so I just went with it. Within the first 200 yards I lost my friends in the crowd. I didn't know whether they were in front or behind. So after the first mile that was a little too fast I tried to settle into my 6min 55sec a mile pace that I'd need to break 3hrs.

Just before the 3mile mark I saw my friends ahead and was happy to see them. I caught them up and we ran together for the next few miles. They were looking good and able to chat a bit whereas I was finding it hard to stay with them.

At the 10mile mark there was a slight incline, nothing too taxing, but my friends pulled away and I didn't see them again until the end. I convinced myself that I was still all right and it would be better to run at my pace and I could catch them later on.

I went through half way in 1hr 36mins and deep inside I knew I had no chance to break 3hrs but a sub 3hrs 10mins was possible if I could get going. I had a good section from miles 14-16 and suddenly I thought I'd got away with it and this wasn't going to be so bad after all. Maybe all that training was in my legs and I could push it hard right to the end.

I was abruptly brought back to reality a mile or so later. My legs felt as though I was running through treacle and the very act of running was proving difficult. I had 9miles to go and I knew that they were going to be 9 very tough and difficult and I wasn't looking forward to a single one of them.

My pace had slowed to 7mins 45secs and it felt even slower. A runner I'd met once or twice before caught me up and we chatted a bit. He congratulated me on my recent marathon and told me I was going well but I didn't feel I deserved any praise right now. Somehow though the very act of running with someone got me going a bit and we ran together for a mile or two.

Another small incline appeared and he disappeared up ahead. I was left alone again with 6 miles to go. It is often said that it is at the 20 mile mark that runners hit the wall but in this race I'd hit it far sooner than that. All pretence of a decent time were out of the window and all that mattered was getting to the finish, licking my wounds and prepare to try again.

With four miles to go I noticed an insect on my shoulder. As I flicked it off my neck went into spasms. That's it ... surely this is my worse race ever. But it got even worse. My pace was down to 13mins a mile. I could walk faster than that and so decided to do so and see whether it would revive me a bit. A number of runners passed me as I walked so I tried to get going again. I did but if you'd been watching me you would describe it as shuffling at best.

With a few miles to go I did consider stopping. This was going to be my slowest marathon ever and I had nothing to gain and was maybe doing lots of damage to my legs but I'd not had a DNF (did

not finish) to my name and didn't want that on my CV so I stubbornly carried on. This pain would last for another 40mins or so. A dnf stands for life.

Eventually the final mile marker arrived and I tried my best to at least look like a proper runner as I ran through the crowds gathered to watch the final section. I finished in my slowest ever marathon at 3hrs 28mins 45secs. It was so good to be able to stop but the pain didn't stop there. I just wanted to get a shower, go home and not think about running for a couple of weeks.

My friends at work asked me why I was so obsessed with breaking 3hrs. Why didn't I be content to run in 3hrs 15mins or even 3hrs 45mins and just enjoy it? Was all this effort to break 3hrs really worth the effort? They couldn't understand my desire to run a marathon at all never mind put myself through all this to run quicker than 3hrs.

We are all different and have different goals but for me I love to try and do my very best, to aim high and I love to set goals and work out how I could achieve them. I'd run a half marathon in 1hr 16mins and I felt I was capable of running a marathon in under 3hrs and I was determined to trying until I did.

In 1987 I got a place in the London Marathon. I'd often said that I didn't want to do a mass marathon like London as it's hard to run with such crowds. A year earlier I'd run in the Great North Run Half Marathon and it annoyed me that for the first mile or two I was struggling to get past runners dressed up in fancy dress and obviously going to take longer than the 1hr 20min pen they had started in. Plus at the end it takes ages to find your family and get back to the car that I'd decided not to run in these really big races.

But the illusive 3hr mark was calling and London is a fast course. There would be lots of runners around that mark that I could use to help pace me to the time so against my better judgment I entered, got a place and set about training hard throughout the winter for Sunday 26th April 1987. From January to April I averaged about 60miles a week with my heaviest week 85miles which included a 24 mile run with the last 13miles run at faster than my marathon pace.

I felt I had given my self the best possible chance of breaking 3hrs. It had dominated my thinking over the last few months and I'd left nothing to chance in my attempt to do it. I woke at 5.30am in time to switch off my two alarm clocks by my bedside. The big day had arrived. I dressed in my running kit that had been paid out the night before, had breakfast, my last intake before the race, gently woke my wife who was coming down to watch and after she'd had a coffee to wake her up we were off to the start.

We left our bed and breakfast and headed our different ways. My wife was going to the finish while I headed to my start at Blackheath. As I approached the station I noticed occasional runners walking along the other wise deserted streets. Along the Strand, however, the road was teeming with runners, men and women of all ages and body types, all joining the queues for the trains to take them to their various starting points.

At Blackheath where the under 40's were to start the crowds had increased to thousands. Everyone has their own preparation to go through, sips of water, smearing petroleum jelly on all moving, chafe-able parts, changing into race kit, donning warm over-tops till the start, a slow jog warm up with a little stretching, casual chat to keep the nerves in check, a last leak, another last leak, a final last leak round the back of the portaloos as it was too late to wait in the queues.

I lined up in the sub 3hr group as the sun came out and we were all getting warmer. We had been forecasted clouds and cooler weather but it looked like it was going to be a warm one which meant making sure I drank enough water to keep hydrated.

Suddenly we were moving forwards. The excitement was mounting to a peak. Runners who had been wearing bin liners, old trousers, old jumpers now took them off and threw them over the crowds of runners to the sides.

The gates were opened and we moved towards the start line in time for the 9.30am start. There was a boom of a cannon and we were off. It took me 1min 35mins to go through the start line. I started my watch so that I would have an accurate time. Remember this was well before we ran with micro chips or gps systems.

Within a mile or so there was sufficient room to run freely and I settled into a smooth pace. It was vital to relax and not waste too much energy early on. I was planning to run a negative split. That means to run the second half faster than the first half. To break 3hrs I'd need to average 6mins 53secs a mile. I was aiming to get to the half way point no later than 1hr 31mins but with enough left in my legs to be able to do the same again.

All my training had been geared to try and achieve that. We all have a limited store of glycogen, which we burn more efficiently than any combination of fat, so it makes sense to trickle the energy store out as slowly as possible. That means knowing beforehand what your optimum pace is, keeping to the painted line on the course, avoiding distractions, eating and drinking just enough to top up your energy stores.

At every mile from the three mile marker, there was a water station with volunteers holding out water bottles, soggy sponges to wipe yourself with and even members of the public offering pieces of orange. I was running strongly and felt that everything was going to plan. There were plenty of people to run with but enough room to run freely. The clouds had spread across the skies soon after the start so we had good running conditions.

I reached the half way point in 1hr 29mins 25secs. I kept the pace going mile after mile. As I reached each arch of coloured balloons, marking another mile I checked my time. Then I tried to inch faster or ease back keeping to my 6.53 pace.

I reached the 20mile mark still bang on target. I knew the sub 3hrs was possible but I would have to run well for the final 6 miles. It's said that 20miles in the marathon is half way. I've never really understood that but today I glimpsed the truth of it. The last 20 miles would mean very little unless I could keep it going. Previous marathons flashed through my mind, especially the tough ones. I tried to block them out and concentrate on keeping the desired pace.

It helped that I was still catching and overtaking people. It is always a good indication of how you doing to see where you are in the field. If people are passing you then you know you are slowing whereas if you are going past people then you must be doing something right.

I was concentrating so hard that I blanked out everything else around me and focused on the patch of ground in front of me. I tried to work out how far I had to go, what pace I'd need to run at and whether I could relax at all. I knew the answer to the last one.

I turned right off the Embankment into Northumberland Avenue and on to the Mall. I told myself there is not far to go, to push as hard as I could, that I didn't want to miss 3hrs by a few seconds because I didn't give it everything I had. I pushed on down Birdcage Walk (after Buckingham Palace) but it seemed to last for ever. I was near my absolute limit and was desperately hoping that the end would appear very soon.

I turned the corner, looked up and there were the 26 mile balloons. I waited until I reached them, knowing that only 385 yards remained. Only! Yet amazingly, I found some new source of energy and I pushed for the line with all I had left.

The large digital clock numbers were changing frustratingly quickly. I was suddenly frantic that I would not beat that 3hrs. I drove my arms harder and my legs responded with a feeble sprint over the last few yards.

I went through the finish line, stopped my watch and gave in. The pain was excruciating and I just waited for it to ease. The stewards were urging me to move forward and slowly I did. My finisher's medal was put over my head; I took a water bottle and a foil wrap and then looked down at my watch. I'd done it 2hrs 59mins 10secs. Mission accomplished at last!

Of all the marathon medals grandad had the London 1987 was the one that gave him the most pleasure and satisfaction. It was only time he broke that 3hr barrier and it meant a lot to him. I remember the first time I broke 3hrs and how pleased grandad was for me. I went on to lower my pb in the marathon to under 2hr 40mins but somehow that 3hr mark was so significant.

Chapter 11

First ultra races

Another time when I visited nanny and grandad's house I looked through the boxes labelled 1988-2006 and there weren't many details of races and when I asked grandad about this he explained that during that time he was running but as they were living and working in Bangladesh and then India he didn't do many races. When they came back to the UK with my Mum and sisters they lived in Leicester for a few years before moving up to Paisley in Scotland. Grandad continued to run and joined Kilbarchan AAC and enjoyed being part of a club and taking part in various races.

Then in 2005 grandad told me he had a calf injury and couldn't run for over a year. It was frustrating for him and he wondered whether he'd be able to do much running again. Fortunately he went to his local hospital and a physiotherapist Catherine helped him get it sorted out and he was back running again.

I once asked him why he started running ultra races. He explained that once his calf injury had cleared up he looked for a new challenge. He'd done marathons and was looking for something a bit different. One day he read the Scottish running magazine; 'My Race' and he read an article about the West Highland Way Race. He'd never heard of the race before but it immediately appealed to him and made enquires about entering.

Before he knew it he had a place in the 2006 whw race and started training. He had 8 months to get himself ready. I loved hearing about the first ultra races he did and often asked him to tell me again

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'When I first heard about the whw race I honestly didn't know whether I'd be able to run 95miles along this long distance footpath from Milngavie to Fort William. It starts at 1am on the third Saturday in June so that's it's as close to the longest day of the year.

I read lots of race reports and watched a video of the race made by someone know within the race as DQ, which stands for Drama Queen. It seems he broke his ankle after only 5miles but managed to keep going and finished the race.

I sat down and planned out my training. I knew I'd need to do lots of off road running and increase the distance that I'd ever run. I decided to work on a monthly run on the route so that by the time the race started I'd covered the whole route. I also planned to increase the distance of these monthly runs.

The other thing I decided to do was start a blog to record my progress. I wanted to share the experience of training for and running an ultra race. Initially I thought I would just run it once but it didn't turn out that way.

Over the coming months I trained, practised eating on the run and what to eat and everything else that is needed to run a long distance race. The other thing I found that was very different about taking part in the whw race is what the then race director, Dario, called the whw 'family.' I made many new friends who gave me lots of advice and encouragement as I started out on this journey.

As part of the preparation for the whw race I entered and ran in the Highland Fling Race which covers the first 53 miles of the whw route from Milngavie to Tyndrum run in late April eight weeks before the main whw race.

Up until that point I didn't feel I really belonged and couldn't really call myself an ultra runner. I had increased my longest run to 42 miles but I it wasn't in a race. On Saturday 28th April 2007 I lined up with 70 other runners at 6am at Milngavie Train Station for the 2nd running of the Highland Fling. I was feeling quite nervous but couldn't wait to get going and complete my first ever ultra race.

It was a great day and I set off steady and enjoyed the whole experience. I had a plan to try and run under 11hrs and at each checkpoint along the way I was a few minutes ahead of my plan. I ran with people for some sections and on my own for other parts. It did surprise me how little you see of other runners over the course of the race.

Katrina, Emma and Hollie were my support team and they had everything ready for me at each checkpoint. I soon realised just how important a support team is. You can so easily waste time at checkpoints if everything is not ready. I'd planned to stop for no more than 5mins at each of the four main checkpoints.

With 9miles to go I caught up with one of the leading female runners, Donna and my good friend, Gordon, caught me. We set off from the final checkpoint at Derrydaroch with a few minutes of each other. I thought I would do really well to finish in front of either of them as they had both ran the full whw race in under 22hrs.

Those final 9miles were so hard. I tripped twice and my legs were feeling very sore and tired. I wasn't too bad going up hill as I walked hard but it was the down hills that were so painful on my

quads. Donna disappeared into the distance and I kept expecting Gordon to catch me but he didn't.

At one point I thought that maybe 10hrs 30mins was possible but with about 4miles to go I settled from 10hrs 40mins as my goal which would still be 20mins faster than I'd planned for. The last couple of miles were hard but I knew I was going to finish. I was feeling quite emotional at the thought of being able to say to people that I was an ultra runner.

I'd always corrected people who asked me if I was a jogger with the reply, 'No, I'm a runner' now I would be able to be to correct them with the reply, 'No I'm an ultra runner!!' I crossed over the stream before Tyndrum and ran along the path for a few yards before turning slightly left and into the final short hill along the road to the finish.

I could see Katrina, Emma, Hollie and my friend from Kilbarchan Keiron. With a hundred yards or so to go I could hardly see as my eyes were filling with tears. It wasn't from pain, though I was in pain, but from the emotion of achieving something that I'd set out to do.

I finished 15th out of 62 finishers in a time of 10hrs 36mins 10secs. I felt I really belonged to the ultra running community. Now all I had to do was the same distance again in June plus another 42 miles!! I tried not to think about that too much at the time but just enjoy the moment of my first ultra.

My enjoyment didn't last too long as the following week I made of the biggest mistakes of my running career. On the Monday night I went along to our regular Club Fartlek session. I was on such a high after the Highland Fling Race that I wanted to tell my friends all about it. Instead of taking it easy at the back I pushed hard for the second half of the session and I was enjoying the comments of my fellow runners who couldn't believe I'd just run a 53 mile race.

By the end of the week I felt a pain in my right shin which was what I later found out, Tibialis anterior tendon sheath inflammation. Basically I injured myself by running too hard so soon after a major race. I learnt the hard way that running ultra races take a lot out of our bodies and that we are most susceptible to injury in the week or two after the race.

I managed to run a two day training run a few weeks later but for the final 2-3 weeks before the race I really wasn't sure whether I'd be able to complete the 95mile race.

The big day finally arrived. I had been thinking about this race for the past 8 months and now it was here. My family were supporting me through the night and then a couple of my friends from Kilbarchan were taking over in the morning. The rules state that you need to have someone with you who can run with you over the final miles if you need help.

The scene at Milngavie Car Park at 11.30pm was unreal. People milling around getting ready and a lot of nervous energy. I spent time to talking to lots of friends I'd met over the past few months and generally making sure I had all I needed for the first leg to Drymen. There are 10 checkpoints along the way and I'd decided to break the whole run down into those sections. It was going to be hard thinking about the whole distance so I decided to concentrate on getting to the first checkpoint and then the next and hopefully get to the end.

At 1am after the race briefing we were off. There was quite a big crowd of supporters cheering us as we ran through Milngavie High Street. We through the woods and I chatted with a few people

on the way. After about 20mins the pain I'd felt in my shin disappeared and didn't return through the whole race. It was so good to be able to run pain free.

Over the next couple of hours to Drymen there were times when I was running with people and there were times I was completely on my own in the middle of the night. It felt strange but the light from my head torch kept me focusing on the patch of ground in front of me.

The next section to Balmaha over Conic Hill went fine except for one slight problem. Someone decided we needed to make a diversion around Garadhban Forest. It was disconcerting to be going a different route and just at the point when I was wondering whether I should head back I found another runner and the right path.

As I approached Conic Hill it was getting lighter and I could switch off the head torch. I'd been told that often you can see an amazing set rise as you come up and over Conic Hill but all I saw was mist and the visibility was down to about 50 yards.

It was good to see my support team at Balmaha and I stopped for a few minutes for something to eat. As I left the outside of my left knee felt really sore. Once I started running it eased off but it wasn't good to have something so sore so soon.

The run along Loch Lomond to Rowardennan was really enjoyable. The temperature was warming up and I was running freely again. I ran most of the section on my own and kept to a pace which I was happy with. After the Rowardennan checkpoint I joined up with another Marcus and we basically ran together for the next 23 miles.

My knee was again sore when I stopped at the checkpoint and I realised that I couldn't afford to stop for too long as it would seize up. It seemed okay when I was running but not when I stopped. For the section to Inversnaid and then Beinglas Farm I ran with Marcus and another runner Derek but there were times when either one or the other was ahead or behind and I'd be on my own and then we'd join up again.

I was working on a sub 23hr schedule that I thought was realistic based on my training runs but I knew it was going to be a challenge especially given that I'd lost some vital weeks in my training due to injury. At each checkpoint over the first 45miles I was getting further and further ahead of my schedule so by the time I reached Beinglas Farm and the changeover in support teams I was over about 45mins up and feeling pleased with myself.

The 9 miles from Beinglas farm to Auchtertyre had been really tough in the recent Highland Fling Race. I'd tripped twice and didn't have good memories of it so I tried to be as positive as I could and it helped that I was still running with Marcus. The encouraging thing was my quads were coping better than the Fling and I was able to still run downhill without any pain.

At Auchtertyre Marcus said he was stopping for a longer break so I continued on to Tyndrum on my own. Again my knee was sore as I started off but soon eased off as I ran. The 3 miles to Tyndrum soon passed and I quickly saw my support team but carrying on to Bridge of Orchy. In any ultra race every runner goes through some tough sections when you wonder whether you will make it.

For me the next few miles were definitely my toughest. I think there were a few reasons. The main one was as I crossed over the finish line of the Highland Fling at Tyndrum it suddenly hit me that this is now the furthest I have ever run in one go. And I have another 42miles still to run! The

other factor was that I knew my friend Gordon was slowly catching me and that unless I could get going he would be catch me.

I struggled on for the next miles resisting the temptation to look back and see where Gordon was but I didn't need to resist for too long as he caught me up. I tried to stay with him but he soon pushed ahead. Then something surprising happened. I said to myself, 'Is that it? Are you going to let him just go past you without a fight?!' I'm now sure whether the food I'd just eaten kicked in or whether it was pure determination but I got going again and before I knew it I'd caught up with Gordon again. Then he would pull away again, then I'd catch him again. This was repeated until we reached Bridge of Orchy.

With about a mile to go before Bridge of Orchy I was back in front and I was feeling good. I made the mistake of running too fast and even though it felt good at the time I paid for it later. Gordon stopped at the Bridge of Orchy checkpoint but I carried on up and over the hill towards Inveroran.

There is a half mile or so climb out of Bridge of Orchy and it was good to be able to walk for a while but then there is the same distance downhill when you can make up some time but to my dismay I realised I couldn't run downhill as my quads were so sore. Every step was painful and instead of running I was gingerly taking one painful step after another. I knew there were quite a few more long downhill sections to come so this wasn't looking good.

My support team Douglas & Keiron were very concerned as they watched my slow progress down the hill. Originally our plan had been for one of them to run with me from Kingshouse, the next checkpoint at 72miles but seeing me struggle decided that Douglas would run with me over the Rannoch Mor. At first I tried to protest as I wanted to keep to the original plan but I soon saw the sense of it and was really happy to have the support.

We ran over Victoria bridge and then along the road before climbing over the gate and into the forest that led up to the Rannoch Mor. As we walked up the hill Douglas said he could see Gordon coming and suggested we make him work for it. So we ran for a bit and the gap opened up. Then we walked for a bit and the gap narrowed. This went on for the next 5-6miles.

Douglas made the observation that Gordon was running at a very economical pace and kept going whereas I was running then walking. My running pace was faster than Gordon's but my walking pace was slower. This was something else I'd need to practise if I was to improve as an ultra runner.

I stayed ahead all the way into Kingshouse. I had now run 72 miles and I had 'only' 23 miles to go. On the positive side I was well over an hour ahead of my sub 23hr plan and I knew I'd given myself fairly generous times over the last third of the route. On the negative side my legs were absolutely shot and I didn't think I'd be able to run much more.

Keiron joined me from Kingshouse and I tried to eat some more food but I didn't have much appetite. I followed Keiron with envy as he skipped along and over all the boulders and rocks. My legs were doing anything but skipping. I knew I was going to be able to finish but I doubted whether I'd be able to run much more.

Just before we reached Altnafeadh at the base of the Devil's staircase Gordon and his support runner Bobby caught up with us. Gordon was still going well and this time when he went past I

couldn't do anything about it. I wished him well and settled into my own little battle of getting to the end of the this race in one piece.

Keiron and I walked up the zig zag of the Devil's staircase as fast as we could. My legs felt fine going up but once we went over the crest of the hill and started to descend towards Kinlochleven I knew I was in trouble. My quads were so sore. Every step down was agony and I literally couldn't take another step without crying out in pain. I decided the only thing I could do was to walk backwards! So for the next half mile or so I slowly made my way down the hill facing the wrong way. It was labourious but at least I was moving.

I was okay on the flatter sections and the up hills but it was the down hills that gave me all the trouble. Thankfully my quads recovered sufficiently for me to be able to walk down into Kinlochleven but they were still really sore.

At Kinlochleven I only stopped for a minute as my knee was also sore and would seize up if I stopped too long. I had 15 miles to go and even though I knew I was going to have to walk all of it I was still on schedule for going under 23hrs which was my goal before the race began. Douglas was now walking with me and helped me through the next few hours constantly encouraging me to eat and keep going.

We passed through Lundavra and now knew the end was in sight. It got dark again so back on came the head torches as we made our way down to the finish at Fort William. Keiron had run up the hill from Fort William so the three of us finished the race together. My quads were still so sore but I managed to get down and finished the race in 22hrs 45mins 19secs.

Once I'd finished, had a shower and something to eat my body seized up and I hobbled to the car to drive to our tent for the night. My feet were covered in blisters, my knee was painful and my quads were completely shot but I'd finished and when I received my finisher's goblet at the prize giving the next day I was very happy I'd made it to the end.'

I loved to look at all the goblets that grandad had received for his whw finishes. I asked him what has been his favourite ultra and he always says the whw race. It was the first one he ever heard about and he always had a special relationship with it and all the friends he made along the way.

Chapter 12

Whw race highlights

Nine years ago in 2031 my grandad completed 25 consecutive whw finishes. His great friend Gordon has the record for the most finishes with 29 and counting but grandad has the record for the most consecutive. It is a record he is very proud of. His 25 goblets are all lined up and no-one is allowed to touch them never mind play with them. Each and everyone has its own story and I've read and reread grandad's race stories from each of those races. But for him and me 2 stand out. The 2014 race which was the year I was born and the 2029 race which I helped as grandad's support.

The 2014 race was grandad's 8th and it was the one where he recorded his best ever time at the age of 55. Before my Olympic race I visited grandad and asked him to tell me about that race and why it was so special.

'After my first race in 2007 I knew I could do better. I was really pleased to have finished but almost immediately I started planning how I could keep running right to the end. I did a lot of research and discovered that my quads were so sore because of DOMS (Delayed Onset of Muscle Soreness). Basically it is the movement of running down hill that causes it. As the muscle lengthens as you stride down the muscle contracts. One of the results of that contraction is myofils are released into the blood stream. It is these myofils that cause the soreness.

It is often felt the day or so after a hard walk in the mountains when you have had a long down hill walk. Or with people who haven't skied before. Because the whw race is so long the effects are felt before the race has finished. The good news was I discovered is that you can train your muscles to cope with this phenomenon.

So I set out over the next winter with two main changes to my training. Firstly I was going to increase my average mileage to over 50 miles a week from the 40 miles I had done for the first year. Secondly I was going to incorporate a lot more downhill running into my training so I would train my legs to cope with the type of running I'd need to do.

I had an injury free 8 months and arrived at the start line in 2008 very focused and aiming to try and run under 21hrs which I felt was possible if everything went well. It went into even better than I'd expected and I ended up finishing in 19hrs 59mins 33secs. I had run under 20hrs which was way quicker than I'd ever thought possible. It was an amazing day and I'd spent the final 5hrs or so from Kingshouse wondering whether I'd be able to get under the 20hrs. I had achieved my goal of being able to run past Kingshouse and all my training had paid off.

It was touch and go right until the end. When I arrived at Braveheart Car Park with just over a mile to go I thought I was going to miss it by a minute or two. I'd accepted the fact that I wasn't going to make it but my support team of Douglas and Keiron had other ideas. They pushed me on and I'm so glad that they did as it was so special to finish in under 20hrs even if it was only by 27secs!

The following year I trained just as hard and set out to see if I could break 20hrs again. It was very satisfying to set out a plan and be able to accomplish it. I finished in 19hrs 51mins 59secs and started to wonder how fast could I go. I knew I was getting older but felt I was still improving and had a few more years left to try and run the fastest I could.

Over the next few years I lowered my pb to just over 19hrs but there was one time that was a constant carrot to aim for. My friend and club mate from Kilbarchan Matt had run an amazing 18hrs 42mins 00secs on his 2nd attempt at the whw in 2009 and I secretly wanted to see if I could beat his time and regain the Kilbarchan club record. Matt had joined the Navy at the end of 2009 and was working in submarines all over the world or more precisely under the world.

Over the next few years he wasn't able to run as many ultra races as he'd like but whenever he did Matt ran quick times and was always competitive. In 2014 Matt's leave schedule coincided with the running of the whw race and he had decided to run again. He too was keen to see if he could lower his time. Once again matt and I had a little race within a race as we both aimed to lower the Kilbarchan record on the whw.

Matt has a very different approach to running the whw race than I do. He likes to go off a lot faster and hope that he can maintain it for as long as he can. The first year he ran the race in 2008 I didn't see him until about 45miles when I caught him. His feet were blistered and he was

struggling after going off too fast. The following year he went off even faster and by Balmaha (19miles) he was 25minutes ahead of me. I assumed I'd slowly catch him again but this time he was one who got it right and I never saw him until it was all over! I kept hearing he was 30mins ahead, 45mins ahead until I realised I wasn't going to catch him.

I realised that if I was going to break Matt's record I'd need to be less cautious early on and try and stay nearer to Matt than I had in previous years. The 2014 race was special because it was part of the build up to the Commonwealth games being held in Glasgow just two months later. For the first time the race committee had accepted 500 entries. The race had grown in popularity over the last five years and more and more people were wanting to test themselves on this great route.

It was a hard decision for the race committee to work out who to accept. There were now clear guidelines as to who could get an entry and the system was as fair and open as possible. The other big change that the committee brought in was that the race was now unsupported except at Auchtertyre. This meant that the organisers provided checkpoints and each competitor could leave a drop bag to be collected at the checkpoint.

Auchtertyre after 50 miles was the only checkpoint big enough to be able to cope with the amount of cars and support. At this checkpoint a large marquee was set up with computer screens and access to the internet. Here friends, family and supporters could follow the progress of the race and more importantly their runner by logging to the race web site which provided up to date information on where each and every runner was. It wasn't quite the same as actually seeing them but it did mean the race could grow and more people could take part without causing problems to local businesses along the route.

Once the runner you were supporting had gone through Auchtertyre the support team would make their way to Fort William where another Hall was provided with more computer access points to follow the second half of the race. It had worked so well last year when the entries were 250 that the race committee had decided to double the numbers for 2014.

The start at Milngavie was actually quite calm. It was decided that the Station Car park couldn't cope with 250 support teams so registration was done the day before the race and then on race day runners and supporters had to arrive by train. So there were lots of people but very few cars so it all worked out fine.

Matt & I had travelled in together but once we'd arrived at Milngavie each of us went about preparing for the start of the race in our own way. Matt had been away for the last few months and so was keen to catch up with many friends. Whereas I wanted to be alone and focus on the task ahead. I felt that this might be my last realistic chance to run under 19hrs. I'd learnt over the last few years of running this race that you can waste a lot of nervous energy before the race even begins. So I like to quietly sit and get myself ready for the race.

With so many starters the runners were divided into three sections. The first section was for those who were aiming to run under 21hrs, the next section for those aiming for under 27hrs and the third section those over 27hrs. As everyone ran with a microchip to record their accurate time it didn't really matter. The waves went off in 5min intervals.

I was starting in the first wave and at exactly 1am we were off. This was my 8th running of the whw race but it doesn't get any easier or the nervous feeling doesn't get any less. In some ways the more times you run the race the more aware you are of how much it can hurt!

I knew to have any chance of breaking the 19hrs and getting anywhere near Matt's record I'd need to make a steady start. Not too fast but I couldn't afford to lose too much time. I was aiming for 1hr 45mins to Drymen which I felt was reasonable without being too silly.

For the first 4-5 miles I was running with others and we all looked and sounded comfortable enough. You can always tell how people are getting on by their breathing. If they are blowing a lot you know they are going too fast. In a race of this length you want to try and get as far as you can down the route as easily as possible.

I knew it was a fine line I was treading today but I was determined to push the boat out and give it all I had. After Beech Tree Inn I found myself on my own and settled into a steady pace. I knew that Matt was ahead but from comments I heard he wasn't too far away.

I arrived at Drymen a couple of minutes over my estimate but feeling good so I was pleased with my start. The light was beginning to come but I kept my head torch for the run through the woods and over Conic Hill. I caught up with a group of three runners and ran with them to the bottom of Conic Hill. I've always walked up the hill faster than those around me and today was no different. I also tend to go down slower than those around me and again today was no different.

By the time I reached Balmaha I was right on my sub 19hrs plan and still going well without any real problems. The next section from Balmaha to Rowardennan is often one of my favourites. The race is well under way but there is plenty of running in my legs and I'm not even thinking about the end. More often than not I end up on my own for these 7miles and the time and miles soon pass. Today though was different. Maybe because I'd gone off quicker than previous years I was starting to suffer. After 2-3hrs the body tends to run out of glycogen stores and switches over to burning fat. That switch over point can be hard on the body and it feels like you are really struggling.

I had to really hang in there, count my breaths and get through it. I did get through it and by the time Rowardennan arrived I was feeling so much better and far more positive about the rest of the race. I was still up on my time but Matt was still nowhere to be seen. I received a few texts from my support team who were following proceedings from the marquee at Rowardennan. They had a copy of my sub 19hr plan and could see that I was right on schedule. It was good to hear from them and know they were rooting for me.

I had a good run into Inversnaid and then set off on the more technical part to Beinglas Farm. Over the years I have run this section many, many times and always someone says to me, 'I don't like this bit.' I've tried to encourage them to be more positive as if you are down on yourself before you even get there then you will dislike it and more often than not struggle. I run with the mantra, 'Run when you can, walk when you have to.' There are parts that are still runnable and you need to run those but the parts that you can't run, accept and try and walk as fast as you can. It doesn't last for ever and once you get through the worse of it you can get going again towards Beinglas.

When I get to the top of the hill I stop and do what many whw runners do. I pause for a moment and think about Dario, who was the race organiser for 10 years before his untimely death in 2009. There is a memorial to Dario at that spot as it was one of his favourite places on the whole route. It makes me realise how privileged I was to have met him and counted him as a good friend. The race is as popular as it is now because of Dario and his legacy.

A runner catches me up as I pause and asks me what the memorial is all about. I spend the next few minutes telling him about Dario and so the history of the race is passed on to another runner. It also helps pass a few more miles and before we know it we are at Beinglas.

There are new owners of Beinglas farm now and they have really embraced the race. There is still no checkpoint and support teams aren't allowed but the owners lay on soup and some goodies for the runner which is greatly appreciated.

I'm pleased to note that I'm now a few minutes ahead of my schedule. I have tried to cut out stops so I grab some food and eat on the move. If you stop for 5mins at each checkpoint you end up adding almost an hour to your time. I knew that I had to keep my stops to the bare minimum if I'm to break that 19hr barrier.

I hear that Matt is about 12mins ahead so it motivates me to keep going and hopefully he will come back to me but I've thought that before and it didn't happen. There are a few runners ahead of me and so I concentrate on trying to slowly catch up with them. I cross the A82 and go through Carmyle Cottage and up and onto the path heading towards to Crianlarich. I'm feeling good and over the next few miles I catch and pass 4 runners. I exchange greetings with each one and we encourage each other to keep going.

Two of the runners I go past have their own race within a race. Tom and Stuart have been experimenting with running barefoot for the past 5 years and they both felt ready to tackle the whw barefoot. So this year, 2014, they set each the challenge to see who would be the first to finish the 95mile race barefoot. They have very similar times running in shoes and in Vibram FiveFingers so it was with great interest that they set off this year.

I caught Stuart first and we ran for a little while together. He was running a very wise race, keeping Tom in sight but not getting caught up with racing against him. I asked how his feet were and he replied that they were as tough as old boots! Even the section after Inversnaid hadn't been too much of a problem and he certainly feels he is running quicker and stronger than ever. Did he feel confident of catching Tom and claiming the first ever whw run barefoot? You bet was the reply.

He did admit though that he had gone off a bit too quick and was paying the price now. He was regrouping for the while and had decided to walk for 5mins run for 5mins until he felt better so I pushed on and set my sights on catching Tom. I was intrigued to find out how he was feeling.

It took me another 15mins but I did eventually catch him. Tom loves the whw race and likes to do things differently. Over the last few years he has run it North to South on the shortest day of the year which meant running for 16hrs in darkness. He has also run the race with no support at all, carrying all he needed with him. Basically lots of mars bars. So to run barefoot is just another challenge to add to his CV.

Tom looked very strong and focused on his running. His running style had been perfected over the last few years as he has practised running more and more barefoot. He started a few years ago after reading Chris McDougal's book, 'Born to Run.' Tom read it just at the time that he was suffering from back pains and decided that maybe this was the answer. He found that he loved the sensation of running barefoot. He described it so well one day on his blog, 'For anyone who hasn't tried barefoot running and wonders why anyone would want to try I would ask you to imagine running with ear plugs, a blindfold and shoes. You start off stumbling along in a blacked out

bubble of your own consciousness. Imagine then taking out the earplugs and hearing the wind, the birdsong, passing traffic, the sound of your footfalls and breathing. Already your world has expanded greatly. Take off the blindfold and suddenly your senses are flooded with all the sights around you. Now take off your shoes and suddenly you're aware of the intimate feel of the pavement, the polished stone kerbs perhaps, the feel of warm tarmac, the delicious coolness of a puddle, the warm squechiness of a dog t... ;-). Okay, maybe not the last (or at least you try your best to avoid that!) but it really does add a whole new dimension to your running and that's why I'll certainly keep running barefoot.'

As much as I agreed with the idea and reasons behind barefoot running I'd not really got into myself but I am full of appreciation of those who do. I chat with Tom for awhile as we make our way down to cross the A82 again and head into Auchtertyre and the opportunity to see our support crews for the only time in the race. Tom is hopeful of keeping ahead of Stuart but also reckons he has gone off too quick and will need to pace himself better over the second half of the race.

I pull ahead of Tom and arrive at the 50mile checkpoint in 9hrs 28mins ... two minutes ahead of my sub 19hr schedule. It's great to see Katrina and Hollie who are supporting me this year. On the first 3 times I did the race the whole family came out on mass but over the last few years they have taken turns to be with Katrina. It is a lot easier now to support as once I've started they can go back to bed for a while and then drive up to Auchtertyre to see how I'm getting on before then heading up to the finish at Fort William. They are in constant touch with how I'm doing via the excellent race web site that has live updates throughout the race.

They say all the right things about well I'm looking and they tell me that Matt isn't far ahead and that I'm on target for my sub 19hrs. After a brief 3min stop I'm off and running again. I've never got to Auchtertyre as quick as this and I'm full of hope that this year is going to be the year I crack that sub 19hrs. I'm not so confident of breaking Matt's record but that was always going to be just a target too far.

I go through Tyndrum in a minute or so under 10hrs. My target was to reach Tyndrum in 10hrs which would then give me 9hrs to run the 42 miles left to Fort William. I thought back to 2008 when I broke 20hrs for the first time. My targets then were 10hrs 30mins to Tyndrum and 9hrs 30mins to Fort William. I felt it was possible but I was going to have to work hard over the next 9hrs to do it.

The next section to Bridge of Orchy always feels a lot easier. There are some inclines but there are also some long descents when you can run for 25-30mins without having to stop. I knew that this was a section when I could just focus on my running. I was completely on my own for this section. I could make out one or two runners ahead and I hoped that one of them was Matt but I couldn't be certain. My long distance vision was getting worse and I didn't like to run in glasses.

Bridge of Orchy came and went and I set off up the hill towards Victoria bridge and then the Rannoch Mor. I was still feeling good. I was eating small amounts regularly and making sure I drank enough. It's important to drink by thirst. The whw race doctor, who is a worldwide expert on ultra running, has published many papers on the importance of fluid and mineral intake on long runs and thanks to his advice there hasn't been any fatalities on the whw race which can't be said for other ultra races around the world.

Over the next 5-6 miles I slowly started to reel in the runner ahead. The closer I got the more convinced I was that it was Matt. I recognised his running style and when I was close enough saw the blue of the navy kit he was wearing as he was being sponsored to run by his sub.

Matt must have looked round because he made another effort to pull away but once we hit a long up hill he slowed again and by the top I'd caught him. We ran together for awhile both trying to suss out who was looking and feeling the better. Neal said he'd slowed down to let me catch up and was going to pull away again soon! I thought he looked a bit tired and was sounding quite negative about things.

On the way down into Kingshouse I decided to push the pace and try and open up a bit of a gap. Matt probably wisely took it easy knowing what was coming. I arrived at Kingshouse (72miles) a few minutes ahead of Matt and hoping that would be the last I'd see of him until the end.

In every race I've done on the whw there is always one section when I fall behind my schedule. Some years it will be early on in the race, other times near the end but there is always one section. Well today it was the 3 miles from Kingshouse to Altnafeadh. Suddenly from feeling strong and full of running it was if a tap was turned off and I was struggling to keep going. Maybe it was after the high of catching Matt or that now I was past him I didn't have something ahead to focus on. Whatever the reason I knew I had to get going and soon otherwise all my hard work until this point would be wasted.

I tried to keep running but there were bits that I walked that I knew I should be running. The stiles I had to climb over felt so much bigger and harder than usual. But by the time I reached the Devil's staircase I was feeling a little better. The food I'd eaten just after Kingshouse was kicking in and I thought by the time I walk up the hill I'd be able to run again. That's how it turned out and I ran into Kinlochleven a lot stronger than I thought possible just an hour before.

Still no sign of Matt but I knew he wouldn't be too far away. He loves the downhill sections and no doubt was making up time on the run into Kinlochleven. I arrived at the checkpoint in 15hrs 45mins so I had 3hrs 15mins to break the 19hrs.

After another very quick stop which included being weighed I was off again for the final 14 miles. This section starts with a big climb out of Kinlochleven. Once again I was feeling the effects on my legs. It was hard going to keep a strong pace up but I knew I couldn't afford to relax. It was a warm afternoon and I was running in a short sleeved top.

I finally reached the road and could start running again. The path along the Lairigmor can be sole destroying. You can see the path winding ahead of you for miles and to make it worse there are three false horizons. You can see the path disappearing in the distance and think that is the end but when you get there you see the path ahead for another couple of miles and then the same again. I've learnt to just keep my head down and concentrate on running the next mile.

Once I get to a certain cattle grid I know it is 3.48 miles to the sheep pen and then a further 1.10 mile to Lundavra so no matter what I think the distance is I know I have to run 3.48 miles. I've found over the years that it helps to keep it in perspective. It doesn't make the actually run any easier though and I was finding it hard.

After a further 15mins or so I was aware of a runner behind me, catching up with every step. I resisted the temptation to look behind but I was hoping it was anyone but Matt. I wasn't totally

shocked to see it was Matt but I was surprised to see how fresh he looked and how strong. We chatted for a minute or so and then when I started to walk up the next incline he carried on running. He encouraged me to stick with him and I decided I would try and do that for as long as I could. Matt really helped me through a tough bit and just concentrating on his back made the running that bit easier.

We reached the sheep pen and I knew we only had another mile or so until we reached the last checkpoint before the finish. Arthur, one of the original runners of the race way back in 1985 had manned this checkpoint for many years and it became a tradition that he lit a bonfire when it got dark. This year he wasn't there as he had decided to run the race himself after a gap of many years. The bonfire continued though and it was all ready to be lit in a few hours time.

I hung onto Matt for as long as I could but once we went through Lundavra he was away and I was back on my own with my own thoughts and calculations. I had 1hr 17mins to run the final 7 miles. I knew it was going to be as close as it was 6 years ago when I was aiming for 20hrs. I told myself I've been here before and I can do it again.

There are a number of inclines and declines and I tried to run up at least half of the incline and all the declines. I knew that this was my best ever and maybe last chance to break that 19hrs and so I tried to block out the pain and keep pushing as hard as I could.

Eventually I came out of the forest and onto the wide path leading down to Fort William. Over the years this track has changed and been moved but it is always downhill and I was really grateful. I had 23 minutes to run from the top to the Leisure Centre at Fort William and I was going to need every single one of them. I couldn't afford to stop or even pause. It had to be eye-balls out the whole way!

I kept telling myself it would soon be over and I could relax. That every step was one step closer. All the tricks I'd developed over the years to keep going and convince my mind were being used.

Finally I arrived at the Braveheart Car Park with just over a mile to go. I had 9mins left ... I'd need to run at 7.45pace at the end of a 95 mile run. It would have to be one of the fastest miles of the whole route. At least it was on pavement and was fairly flat. There are a few markers along the way so as I ran past the path just off the road, then the 30 sign I knew I was getting closer.

As I passed the official end of the whw route I glanced at my watch and saw I had less than 2 minutes left but it should be enough. I pushed with all I had left and when I turned into the Leisure Centre and saw the balloons showing the finish I realised I was going to make it.

I stopped my watch at 18hrs 59mins 20secs. Despite my tired legs I was overjoyed at having achieved a time that I seriously thought was beyond me. For once in my life I felt utterly speechless!

I remember asking grandad what happened to Matt and who won the barefoot challenge? Grandad explained that Matt ran so hard down the hill into Fort William that he set a new best time for the last 7 miles and finished in a new pb of 18hrs 32mins 46secs so the Kilbarchan record was going to be safe with him.

Tom and Stuart battled all the way to Kinlochleven where they decided that they both deserved to be the first runners ever to complete the whw barefoot so in the spirit of the very first whw race in 1985 Tom and Stuart decided to help each other and ran the last 14 miles together.

The other notable thing about the 2014 race was that Dickie finally won the whw race. He had been trying for over 10 years, had come very close in 2009 when he was third but this was the year he finally won the big prize. Plus he went under 16hrs for the first and only time in his life.

So all in all 2014 was a special year and not only because I was born!

Chapter 13

whw race 2029

The whw was so much part of our family. Every June we knew that grandad would be running the whw and nanny would be supporting him. Nanny told me one time that after the 2014 race grandad continued to run but never quite reached the heights of that race. He was slowing down and despite his best efforts it was getting harder each year. So he decided to change his goals, make sure he finished each year but add in a few extra challenges.

One year when he finished he went straight on and climbed Ben Nevis. Another year he decided that doing it once was not enough so he turned round and ran all the way back to Milngavie. He did talk about combining those two by running the race, climbing Ben Nevis and then running back to the start but he never actually did that one.

Over the years the whw race just got bigger and bigger. 500 went to 750 and then in 2020 the race committee took the decision to run two races on consecutive weekends. The first weekend was for the female runners and men over 50 and the second weekend for all the male runners under 50. It proved a big success and by 2029 there were 1,500 runners over the two weekends.

There was a full time staff of 5 people organising the race and the other two races on the route, the ever popular Highland Fling in April and the Devil o' the Highlands in August. The so called 'Triple Crown' was now an established competition and many sought to run all three in one year to join the club and receive the special Triple Crown buff.

It meant that support had to be very restricted with only Auchtertyre being available for family and friends to actually see their runners. It also meant that the volunteers who manned the checkpoints had a massive role to play in encouraging the runners as they went through and many checkpoint teams took it upon themselves to be the best checkpoint on the route. Year on year they sought to outdo each other and it became a competition within the race to provide the best support at checkpoints. The runners certainly appreciated it.

By the time I was 13 years old I was desperate to be allowed to support grandad on one of his races. I knew that 2029 when he was going to be 70 was a big milestone and I wanted to be on his team. I was almost 15 and everyone agreed I could do it.

The other reason why it was so special was for the last few years grandad said he had two main goals left on the whw. The first was to complete 25 consecutive finishes. He would complete that in 2031 so he was almost there.

The second goal was to try and beat his friend Mac who held the over 70 whw record. Mac had always inspired my grandad when he ran his fastest ever whw at the age of 60 in 19hrs 8mins. Mac continued to run year after year and in 2019 set the record for a 70yr old when he finished in 22hrs 7mins 12secs.

Grandad set his sights on that record and trained the hardest he had done for a number of years throughout the winter of 2029. Fortunately for me the race committee had accepted our request that nanny and I could support grandad at various checkpoints along the way so it was with eager anticipation we arrived at Milngavie Train Station ready to support grandad in his attempt to break Mac's over 70 yr old whw record.

It was the first I'd been at Milngavie Train at the start of a whw race and it didn't disappoint. Even though the first weekend of the race was for women and men over 50 it was full of very serious looking runners. But the other thing that struck me as how ordinary everyone looked. Having talked to my grandad about all these amazing races I was expecting the runners to look different somehow. I realised there and then that this was a race anyone could do if they had the commitment and desire. I knew that one day I wanted to be here in the middle of the night in June ready to tackle the race.

As this was my 23rd whw race I knew what to do and had my little routines. Where to go for a last minute wee, where to sit while the last minute instructions were given out but this year I was caught up in Rebekah's excitement. It was infectious and I felt as nervous starting this race as I had for any of the previous 22. I knew that I had a chance to finally get my name on the whw record books. It probably wouldn't last too long with other good runners coming after me who would also be after the honour of holding the over 70 record. I would be happy to hold it for a year.

At a few minutes before 1am I made my way to the start. I've always thought that the first quarter of a mile is one of the strangest for a long distance footpath in the open country. We run under a road, then up some concrete steps and then through the high street. Each year over the last 20 years or so the people of Milngavie have really taken the race into their hearts. Now almost everyone man, women and child stays up and cheer the runners on their epic personal journey which hopefully will take them all the way to Fort William.

The high street was packed with people 10-15 deep, bands played and a lone piper standing on a pedestal in the middle of the route played 'Scotland the Brave' as we ran past. I can tell you I had a tear in my eye as I set off on this journey once again. There are lots of advantages of having run the race so many times but there are also disadvantages. The main one being you know how hard it is going to be. I think back to my first ever race and I realise how naive I was. I was all excited chatting away to people, without a clue as to what I'd let myself in for.

It was very different now. I knew exactly what lay ahead. I knew there was going to be times when I felt great and everything was wonderful but there would be other times when everything hurt and I seemed to have run out of energy.

So I found a little space to run with some ahead and others behind and concentrated on getting to Drymen as easily as possible. I used to run with little cards that had all my times for every mini-section but I'd done the race so many times now that I knew them all off by heart. Katrina reckoned my memory was slipping but I could still remember the important stuff!

Once grandad was away nanny and I wandered back to the car and we drove to Drymen. Nanny explained that she hadn't been there for years now ever since they changed the rules on support teams. It was going to be a trip down memory lane for nanny too. I was surprised to see quite a few cars at Drymen. It seems that some people will always try and avoid the rules. I had sure everyone saw our official support team sticker.

We arrived in time to see the leading female runners go through. There was a group of 4 women together and they looked as though they were going to battling right to the end. Not long after them another group of men and women and then a steady trickle of runners. I knew it was going to be dark but I didn't realise how difficult it is to work out who is who. I was convinced I'd seen grandad several times until we finally did see him.

He said he would use a trick he started on his second whw race, namely put his head torch onto to flashing mode so we knew it was him coming. Nanny and I had his planned sub 22 schedule and I was pleased to see that he arrived a minute or so ahead of the time.

Grandad didn't stop but gave us a big smile and said he was fine and that we'd see him in Balmaha.

I might have been smiling but I was hurting inside. The run to Drymen had been harder than I'd wanted. I was on time but I seriously wondered whether I'd be able to keep this pace going. It had been several years since I'd got anywhere near 22hrs and I was having grave doubts as to whether I'd bitten off far more than I could chew. To be honest if it wasn't for Rebekah and her complete confidence in me I would have settled for just finishing and forgetting about the record.

I was running with a couple of female runners and together we made our way through the forest and then up and over Conic Hill. The sun was coming up and it was one of the most amazing sun rises I'd seen. When I first ran the whw race I was told that the sun rise over Conic Hill at 3am is a great sight but it took several years before the weather was good enough to really see what they meant. I could count on one hand the sun rises I'd seen that were worth writing about but today it happened.

It was absolutely stunning. As the sun rose above the mountains around the rays of sunshine lit everything up in amazing colours. It also lifted my spirits and I was felt a different person as I made my way off Conic Hill and into the checkpoint at Balmaha. I suddenly felt that the record was possible and I had the whole day ahead of me to make it happen.

The checkpoint at Balmaha was amazing. The car park was transformed into a mobile support centre. There was food available and everything a runner could possibly need. The marshals suspected that the runners would need lots of reassurance that could do this. They had run the first 19miles but still had a long way to go and would need that help. The runners in the top half of the field would be fine but it was those nearer the cut off times who would really benefit from their support.

Throughout the day I was so impressed with the people who support this race. They give up a weekend every year to support and encourage the runners. Thankfully the midges I had heard so much about are no longer with us. A few years ago scientists finally discovered a way to control them and now they are a thing of the past.

Grandad once again was through quite quickly and we just had enough time to give him some water, his energy drink and some jelly babies. When I said to nanny, 'All this waiting about for 1 minute of action' she just replied, 'Welcome to the world of supporting ultra running!' and added with a sigh, 'I've been doing this for 23 years!!'

The section to Rowardennan was fine. The sun was up, the pace steady and I continued to run with various people. Some of them I knew and had heard all my stories but others only knew about me and wanted to hear what the race was like when I first started. The time and miles flew past as I told them about how different the race was in 2007. Yet for all the changes it is still fundamentally the same. Someone rising to the challenge of running 95 miles non stop from Milngavie to Fort William. Yes we might have micro chips to record our progress, gps systems that give live updates to our supporters but basically it is the same as it always was putting one step in front of the other thousands of times until you reach the end.

As I arrived at Rowardennan I noted that I was now 7minutes ahead of my sub 22hr schedule and feeling a lot more comfortable than I'd been at Drymen. It was good to see Katrina and Rebekah. They seemed to be having a good time but it would be a good while until I saw them again as they had the long drive right round Loch Lomond to come.

We waved grandad on his way with a cheery 'see you at Beinglas' and then headed back to the car for our trip round the Loch. As we set off nanny explained that we would stop at McDonald's in Balloch on the way. That was part of the family tradition when the whole family supported grandad. By the time they got there it would be about 6am and they had been up all night so were tired but full of fun. Nanny told me lots of stories I'd be able to use as bargaining chips with my Mum!

It was warming up by the time we arrived at Balloch and nanny was ready for her morning cup of coffee. She always feels better after the first coffee of the day and especially when you've been up all night. After our breakfast we got back into the car and on the way I could follow the race on the internet. I looked across the Loch and imagined where grandad would be right now. I hoped he was still running well and on target for his record. I felt quite responsible for making sure he had all he needed. Nanny seemed a lot more relaxed but she's done it a few more times than me.

The road at the top of Loch Lomond is very different to when grandad started running the race. Nanny explained that it used to be a horrible drive that she dreaded every year but now they have widened the road and there is now plenty of room for 2 lanes and the trip takes a lot less time.

Before long we were at Beinglas Farm and with our official pass we were able to drive right up to the route. We arrived in time to see the leading ladies and over 50 men running through. There was still a group together and they looked good considering they have already run 42 miles. We reckoned that grandad should be through in another 50mins or so.

The run to Inversnaid Hotel was fine. I walked up most of the long hill but ran freely on the down hills and along the single track into the checkpoint. I had caught a few other runners which always helps to feel you are running okay. It's when people are going past you that you know things are not going so well.

The track hadn't changed much over the years. It was more worn after the thousands of walkers and runners and in one or two areas the authorities had improved the path as it was in danger of disappearing completely. I went past Dario's memorial and paused for a moment or two as I

always do and then made my way into Beinglas Farm. It is one of my favourite checkpoints as it signifies a change in terrain. The paths are wider and more stony and the checkpoints are further apart.

Also by this stage I have a good idea of how well I will do. I reckon I can guess within a few minutes my finishing time barring injury or accidents. Today I felt that sub 22 was going to be very difficult. The record was a few minutes over 22hrs so I might have a chance but it wasn't going to be easy. I tried to ignore the finish and concentrate on getting to the next checkpoint.

It was a novelty to see Katrina and Rebekah at Beinglas Farm. For many, many years we have not been able to have any support at Beinglas but as I was going for the over 70 record I was allowed support and it was appreciated. I only stopped for a couple of minutes as I needed to keep going.

Once grandad had gone through we headed to Auchtertyre. We would be able to join all the other supporters in the marquee and find out what was happening throughout the race. Nanny seemed to know so many people and it took ages before we could actually get to a computer screen and find out what was going on. So many friends wanted to know how grandad was getting on and asked us to pass on their best wishes.

The scene in the marquee at Auchtertyre was really fun. Every time an update was shown on the big screen a cheer went up. The computer screens were used to follow your runner and you knew when they would be arriving at the half way mark. It worked really well and meant that a lot more people could run the race.

I felt really privileged to be able to visit the various checkpoints along the way and follow first hand what was happening. We knew that grandad would need to come through Auchtertyre around 10hrs 50mins if he had a chance to break Mac's over 70 record. The last we heard was that he had crossed the A82 and was just a mile or so away from the checkpoint.

He had about 7mins to make it and we knew that he was going to be a little slower than he'd hoped but not too bad considering he'd run almost 50miles. We saw him passing through the gate and then running down past the wigwams that were all really smart and new. They had kept the original look but improved them out of recognition.

For the first time I thought grandad was looking tired and he didn't seem to have his usual bounce and energy.

The last few miles had been really tough. My legs were feeling their age but I was determined to try and keep on record pace for as long as possible. The thing is you never quite know how a race will go until you are well into it. I was well into this race and I didn't really want to face up to the reality that there was a long way to go and I was finding it very hard.

I wasn't ready to abort the record attempt just yet but I knew that things would need to improve and quickly. I decided to stop for a bit longer at the checkpoint and try and eat something a bit more substantial than jelly babies. I ate some pasta and a rice pudding and hoped that it would make the difference.

After what seemed like moments but was in fact 8mins I set off again and tried to concentrate on the next section to Tyndrum then Bridge of Orchy. The first few miles are fairly flat so I tried to

get going and run as much as I could. My legs were feeling generally tired. I wasn't carrying any injuries but every step felt hard work.

As we waved grandad off we were concerned and it was still a long way to go. Nanny reckoned she hadn't seen him that tired so early before and she's been around for many races! We made our way to Bridge of Orchy where we hoped we'd see him looking better and back on form.

I was really enjoying my day and it was really interesting to see this race that I'd heard so much about. I suppose it wasn't the sort of thing that the average 15 yr old girl would want to be doing on a Saturday but for this 15yr year old it was a great day out. It made me more determined that ever to try and become a runner and be able to take part in races this like in the future.

When we arrived at Bridge of Orchy we spent some time chatting to the officials. It seems that some of them have been marshals for many years and even though they have never done the race themselves they feel so much part of it. They recognise many of the runners year after year and they would really miss it if they didn't help.

The checkpoint at Bridge of Orchy looks great with banners, balloons and lots going on. There is a band who are playing music as the runners come through. The marshals know that many runners see this checkpoint as a key one. After this they are getting ready to run the 12miles to Kingshouse over Rannoch Mor. Depending on the weather it can be a very long 12 miles. So any encouragement they get is so appreciated.

After Tyndrum I start to feel a bit better and am able to run most of the way to Bridge of Orchy. I'm sure anyone looking on would think I'm shuffling along but to me it feels like I'm flying. It's all relative I suppose. It does feel good to have enough energy to be running again. I soon start to feel a lot more positive and even start to wonder whether Mac's record might be back on. I decide to try and make this good period last as long as possible and then decide when I get to Bridge of Orchy and more importantly Kingshouse whether I might be able to go for it.

I've discovered over the years of running this race that you can't take anything for granted. If you are going well you have to be prepared for a tough section to come and if you are having a tough section then hang it there because soon enough you can pull through it and get going again. I'm convinced a lot of it is in the head. If you listened to your mind you wouldn't start or certainly pull out by half way. You can always do more than your mind is telling you.

I run into the checkpoint at Bridge of Orchy as the band is playing a golden oldie, 'I will walk 500 miles' by the Proclaimers. It is a stirring song and raises my spirits as I catch the music as I run down the hill.

Katrina and Rebekah are waiting for me with an anxious look on their faces. They can see I'm running better and a smile soon appears on their faces. They have a variety of food on a tray all ready for me to take. I pick a few things out, have an energy drink and then set off for Rannoch Mor and Kingshouse.

I climb up the hill and then over the top and down to Inveroran Hotel. I think back to the very first time I did the whw race in 2006 and I remember how long it took me getting down to the Hotel as my quads were so sore. My support team were watching me slowly make my way down and knew I was in trouble.

I feel better today but not by much. The good feeling didn't last too long and I'm having to dig in and set myself lots of little goals to keep going. 'I'll run to the next field' then 'I'll run till that car' and so until I go through the gate and start the climb on the way up. At least then I have an excuse to walk and I use the time to refuel and tell my running muscles to rest while the walking ones take over.

There are a lot of walkers all coming the other way and by the sound of the 'You're the man' and 'You're awesome' I conclude they are American. Their support is appreciated and I try and thank each and every one but I'm using energy I don't really have.

The miles over the Rannoch Mor seem to take for ever and I resort to one of my favourite thoughts, 'if I keep putting one foot in front of the other I will get there Eventually!' Minute by minute, mile by mile I keep going, running when I can but walking all the up hills and even some of the flats. Kingshouse Hotel comes into view but I know there is still 3 miles to go before I'll get there. At this pace that's another 25mins or so but at least it's mainly downhill.

It is during this 3miles that I realise I'm not going to beat Mac's record. I've fallen at least 30mins behind schedule and there is no way I'm going to be able to make that up over the last 25miles. I decide to concentrate on getting to Kingshouse and then I'll reassess how I feel and work on a new target to keep me going.

Grandad's estimated time of arrival at Kingshouse comes and goes. I look to the path and will my grandad to appear over the horizon but he doesn't. 10mins past and still no sign, then 20mins, then 30mins and just when I think he must have stopped he appears. I run out to see him and run the last few hundred metres with him. He says he's okay but has found that last section really hard. I try to say the right things but even though he nods I don't think he's taking it in.

Grandad doesn't stop too long. He seems focused on getting going again and doesn't want to waste anymore time. We don't talk really talk about the record. I think we both know that it's now out of reach and I'm not quite sure what to say. I know he has been training really hard to beat it and so I'm not sure how he'll cope for the rest of the way. Nanny is far more laid back and says if he wants to stop he can but we both know that's not going to happen.

I start to do some sums in my head. 2hrs 30mins to Kinlochleven, 2hrs to Lundavra and 1hr 45mins to Fort William. That would give me a time of 22hrs 55mins. I know it's way over the sub 22hrs I was aiming for but I comfort myself with the thought of how many 70 yr olds could run 95miles in under 23hrs.

Now all I have to do is make it happen. I find I always need something to aim for and so this becomes my target. 2hrs 30mins to Kinlochleven. That's all I'm aiming for. Break it down into bite size pieces that I can manage. Don't worry about the fact that you've still got over 6hrs to run.

Now that I've accepted the record has gone I can relax a bit and I try and look around and take in the amazing scenery. I've been running on this route for almost 25yrs yet it is still so special. Every time it is different and I don't think I'll ever tire of running on the whw.

As I climb up the Devil's Staircase I catch another runner who is also struggling. It is my good friend, Jim from Kilbarchan. Jim has done the race many times and we've had some good battles over the years. We chat for a while and agree to stick together this time and help each other.

Neither of us wants to race. I lead the way up the hill but once we get over the top he takes the lead and I work hard trying to stay with him.

We continue like this the rest of the way to Kinlochleven. I lead the up hills and he takes over on the down hills. By helping each other we arrive in Kinlochleven in 2hrs 25mins so I'm 5mins ahead of my revised plan.

It's amazing how running with someone helps pass the time and the miles. We agree to a 5mins top and then we are going to set off to run as much as we can together over the final 14miles to Fort William.

One part of me is really sad that grandad is not going to break the record but another part of me is really proud at the way he is able to keep going and finish the race. When we see him at Kinlochleven he is totally focused on getting the race finished and we have no doubt that he will do. Nanny is pleased that he has someone to run with.

Once he's gone we head up to Fort William. We could go to Lundavra but it's a difficult drive in and we've arranged with grandad to see him at Braveheart Car Park just before the finish. We have plenty of time so we go to our bed & breakfast in Fort William. For many years Nanny and grandad would camp at the end of the race but eventually nanny put her foot down and said if she was going to continue to support him the least she wanted was a decent bed to sleep in at the end, which is fair enough.

After checking in we head to the finish where the leading women and male super vets (over 50) have already finished. Lots of people ask us about grandad and they are disappointed for him that he's not going to get the record but are full of admiration that he is going to finish yet again in a good time.

The climb out of Kinlochleven is always one of the hardest. You have 80 miles in your legs and then have to find a way to walk up the hill as fast as you can. We work together taking turns to lead and keep going as steady as possible.

One we get onto the pace of the Lairig Mor we decide to try and run when we can and push hard the rest of the way. We chat about all the races we've done together over the years. Jim talks about the day he finally broke 3hrs for the Marathon in 2010 at the London Marathon. He had been trying for 3 years or so and finally everything came together and he did it. We also reminisce about the very first ultra we did together in 2009. That was the year I was 50 and I'd set myself the challenge of running five ultra races in the year.

The final one was in December and Jim and Andrew, another Kilbarchan club mate, had decided to run the Saintelyon race in France. It was Jim's first race over the marathon distance and we'd trained together for 5-6 weeks in preparation. Normally I don't like to try and run a race with someone else as it's almost impossible to run exactly the same pace all the way through. But in our training there was nothing between us and we both agreed we could help each other in the race.

So we set off planning to run as far as we could together but with the proviso that if either of us was going well near the end then they could push as hard as they could and not worry about the other one. Jim kept saying it won't be me pushing on but I suspected it might be.

There were over 2,000 runners lined up at midnight on Saturday 5th December 2009 for this 43miles race from St Etienne to Lyon. I had never been in an ultra race with so many people and it was an amazing sight to see all these head torches in one place.

Jim & I set off and soon found our place in the race. We were both determined to break 7hrs which meant running at an average of 9.47mins per mile. Over 50% of the race was on road and the other 50% on trails so we knew we had to keep the pace below 9mins miles for the road sections.

The race went like clockwork and we stayed together right through the night. We took turns helping each other and running together definitely benefited both of us. With about 5miles to go we were still side by side but I felt that Jim was running stronger than I was. I told him to push on but despite agreeing that he would he said he wanted to stay together. I tried to protest but he was insistent so we ran all the way to the finish not quite holding hands but shoulder to shoulder.

We finished in 6hrs 44mins 32secs and I was glad that we stayed together but I did wonder whether I would have stayed with Jim. I suspect not! Our friend Andrew also had a great race finishing in 7hrs 28min 40secs. Jim and I went on to run many races together including the whw and so he was the perfect person to help me through this race.

We kept going as best we could until Lundavra and then we knew we were going to finish. We only had just over 6miles to go and the end. I started thinking about how good the shower would be at the end dreaming about lying in a comfy bed.

It was getting dark so on came the head torches that we'd taken at Kinlochleven. The run through the forest in the dark can be quite eerie but after all the ups and downs we made our way to the wide path at the top of the hill and knew we just had the run all the way down to Fort William to go.

We took our time but tried to run as much as we could. Jim is always very cautious running down the steep hills as his knees have always been sore after his many years of playing football. He told me once about one injury when he was up for a corner and about to score when the goalkeeper came out to tackle him and dived at his feet. The keeper instead of getting the ball ended up hitting Jim's knee and 5 of his teeth were lodged in Jim's knee! The keeper was taken off to hospital and Jim's knee was never quite the same.

We were waiting at Braveheart Car Park at 11.30pm in the cold and dark. We waited in the car for a while but then we didn't want to miss grandad coming through so we braved the cold and were standing listening out for signs of runners coming through. During the 20mins we waited we saw two runners come through, one looking remarkably fresh and the other as though he was near death's door but both very happy the end was in sight.

We could hear grandad and Jim before we saw them. They are like a pair of old women chatting away. You'd think after hours of running together they would have run out of conversation but no. They were still talking. At least they were still running. When they came through we gave them a final encouragement to keep going but they seemed very happy to be still running and the time didn't see to bother them. We jumped back in the car and headed to the finish which was just over a mile away.

We ran down the road together. We were going to be a few minutes over the 23hrs but for once it didn't really matter. We were both content to finish and it made it special to finish together.

Nothing was said but we both wondered just how many more races would we be able to do. Jim was 67 and I'm 70 so we have done really well to get this far. This made the final run to the finish even more special.

We went past the roundabout where the official finish of the whw used to be. It was moved into the centre of the Fort William many years ago. The whw race continued to finish at the Leisure Centre. I'd not seen the new Leisure Centre as it has been rebuilt over the past year and a very splendid building it is.

Katrina, Rebekah and lots of others were all waiting to cheer us in. Jim allowed me to run the final few yards just ahead of him and I took in the applause with gratitude. I may not have broken Mac's over 70 record but I'd finished my 23rd consecutive whw race. Just two more to go!!

I was so proud of my grandad as he finished the race. It made me realise more than ever that everyone who finishes this race is a winner. It doesn't matter whether you are first or last, getting to the end is such an achievement that everyone deserves that crystal goblet.

The next day at the prize giving I was even more proud. My grandad received a rousing round of applause as he received his well earned goblet. Friends told him he could go for the record next year but I don't think that was on his mind but with grandad you never know!

Chapter 14

Hardmoors 110

After I was involved in the 2029 whw race I couldn't get enough of hearing about all the ultra races that grandad had done or knew about. I knew that this is the type of running I wanted to do. The adventure, the challenge and the friendships. It all sounded so exciting. Most of my school friends couldn't really understand what I was so excited about but I just couldn't get fired up about make-up, boys and the rest of the things 15yr old girls were interested in. I knew that I was considered a bit of a freak but I knew what I wanted and went for it.

I spent as much time as I could chatting with my grandad and asking him hundreds of questions all about the races he'd done, how he trained and learning as much as I could. I think he was really pleased to have someone who wanted to listen and we would talk for hours.

I knew a lot about the whw race but I was keen to find out about other races that grandad had run. I once asked him after the whw what was his next favourite. He thought for quite a while and said he really couldn't decide between the Hardmoors 110 and the Ultra de Mont Blanc.

Those were two races I knew a little about as a 15yr old so I asked him to tell me more about them. He started by telling me the story of when he first did the Hardmoors 110.

In 2009 I was 50 and I decided to set myself the challenge of running five ultra races over the year. I chose the three races on the whw route, The Highland Fling in April, the full whw race in June and the Devil o' the Highlands Race in August. For my next one I chose the Hardmoors 110mile race in September. Originally I'd planned to run the Rotherham 50 in December but for that year the organisers moved it to October, just three weeks after the Hardmoors so I ran the Saintelyon race instead.

The Hardmoors 110 was a race I really wanted to do after I'd read Mac's report of the first running of the race in 2008. The race basically follows the Cleveland Way in North Yorkshire and sounded really tough which only added to the appeal. The race starts at 7pm on the Friday night in Helmsley and then you have 35hrs to run the 110 miles to Filey. The first 11hrs are in darkness as the race is held on the last weekend of September each year.

I knew it was going to be a tough race as I'd never run on the route before, didn't really know what to expect and I was attempting to do it just a few weeks after the Devil o' the Highlands race. In preparation for the race I'd run a 60miles training run which looking back I'm not sure if that was the best idea.

The Hardmoors Race is now in 2029 a major fixture on the ultra scene in the UK with an entry of well over 200 every year running and the sister race the Hardmoors 55 which takes place in March attracting over 500 runners. But when I ran the second ever Hardmoors 110 in 2009 there was only 19 running. Dave who has organised the race since the start deserves a lot of credit for getting the race going and keeping it going especially during those early years.

Katrina decided she didn't fancy a weekend sitting in a car through the freezing night so Matt and his wife Leanne volunteered to support me. We travelled down from Paisley on the Friday afternoon arriving a couple of hours before the start of the race. With only 19 runners it was such a low key registration. I only knew one other runner, Luke, who had run the Devil's race recently. He wasn't feeling too good and was struggling with a cold but had decided having driven all the way from Aberdeen that he might as well start and see how far he got.

Before long we made our way to the centre of Helmsley where Dave gave us a brief pep talk. We walked a few minutes to the official start of the Cleveland Way where we had another pep talk. I think we were all keen to get going. I know I was. It was almost dark from the start so we all had our head torches on.

The race favourites Ross and Bernt set off pretty quickly up the hill, not to be seen by me at least until the prize giving on Sunday afternoon! A group of us including Luke followed and we soon settled into our own pace. By that year I'd run the whw three times and knew every twist and turn. Running the Hardmoors 110 was totally different. I didn't know what was coming next. I'd tried to find out as much information about the route as I could but there is nothing like actually running on the course to really know.

Katrina and I had planned to recce the route in the summer before the race but we went on holiday to Portugal instead. Then I thought I'd use this first run to get to know the route with the idea of really having a go the next year but I felt I was running well and having made the effort to come I might as well go for it.

I had printed out on cards the course description that Dave had given us and I was following the route fine. One of my fears about this race was getting lost and running further than I needed to. 110 miles is far enough in my book without adding on miles.

The first section was to Sutton Bank, 7.71miles from Helmsley. I ran with Luke and a couple of others for most of the way and was feeling quite comfortable. When I arrived at the first checkpoint Matt told me I was in 3rd place which surprised me as I knew there was another runner after the two leading guys.

The small mystery was cleared up a few minutes later when a runner called Steve caught up with me. He explained that he was ahead of me before the first checkpoint but had taken a wrong turn and I'd gone past while he headed back. We ran together for 10mins or so in silence and then Steve pointed out some of the views and what we would be able to see if it was light!

From then on we started chatting which made the miles tick by quicker. Steve had done the race last year finishing well over 30 hrs and was determined to run under 30 hrs this year. He'd done a 3 day training run fairly recently and so he ought to know the way. I was a bit concerned though considering he'd already got lost once!

Steve told me that last year he caught up with a young lad before half way who was starting to struggle and Steve had stayed with him and helped all the way through to the end. There was a couple of times when he sat with him and his dad at a checkpoint for an hour or so while he decided whether to go on or not. At first I thought he must know him and had arranged to run together but no, it turned out he only met him on the race. I asked him why did he stay with him and Steve replied that he felt he should. Now that is going the extra mile if you ask me. I know I wouldn't do that!

We ran into the Osmotherly checkpoint which is almost 21 miles into the race. Leanne was ready to run as the plan was she would run with me through part of the night. It was pretty cold by now and we started running to keep warm. Steve stopped for a few minutes but before long he and Luke had caught up with us and the four of us ran together.

The next section to the Wainstones is on the old Roman Road and I thought about how tough it must have been laying that road all those years ago. We were going at a good pace and I could see that Leanne was finding it hard to keep up. I wasn't sure what to do as I wanted to keep with Steve and Luke but didn't want Leanne to be left behind.

As we made our way down some steep steps to Lord's café Steve tripped and fell quite heavily. He was running in road shoes which didn't give him much grip. I stopped to make sure he was okay but he said he seemed fine but was going to take it easy on the rest of the way down and see how it felt. Leanne decided to rejoin Matt in the car as she could see that I had others to run with and that I'd be fine.

Luke and I set off hoping that Steve would soon catch us. We went past the checkpoint at the Wainstones and continued to run together. A group of three runners went past us on the descent to the road. They all seemed to be going well so we didn't try and stay with them.

After a quick stop to refuel and grab some more food we were off heading to the checkpoint in the middle of the Moor called Bloworth Crossing. It was good to run with Luke and we chatted most of the way. I sensed that I wouldn't be able to run with Luke all the way but it was good to have some company for as long as possible.

We saw the light at Bloworth Crossing quite a while before we arrived there. Mac, our friend from the whw race was lying in his bivvy tent. Mac had run the race last year and it was his report that inspired me to run the race. He wasn't running this year but had volunteered to man this checkpoint in the middle of nowhere right through the night.

Mac showed us a tyre mark not 2 feet from his head where he said a Landrover had driven by at high speed. He wasn't sure whether the driver even saw him but a few feet closer and it would have been curtains. A scary experience.

We didn't stop long but pushed on towards Kildale. I continued to run with Luke but I sensed that he was stronger than I was and I felt I was trying to run at his pace and not my own so at the next hill when he continued to run I walked, took some time to eat and drink and then settled into my own pace.

It was the first time in the race so far that I was on my own. I assumed with only 19 runners in the field I would be on my own for most of the race but I'd been with people for the first 36 miles which is more than the whw race I'd run earlier in the year with almost 150 running.

I felt good and settled into a steady run telling myself to take it easy. Before I knew it I'd caught back up with Luke and we continued to run together. A couple of miles before Kildale we heard a runner behind us and it was Steve. He explained that after his fall he'd taken it easy for a while and was struggling. He said he even contemplated climbing in with Mac in his bivvy bag for a sleep. He was now feeling a lot better. That was obvious as Luke and Steve headed off down the hill leaving me behind! I was quite happy as once again I sensed they were going better than I was.

As I approached Kildale I realised I'd been running for 8hrs without a real stop so I decided to stop for a few minutes, change my top, have something to eat and rest. Luke didn't stop too long and he was off and I thought Steve would do the same but as he came alongside Matt & Leanne's car he asked whether we could stay together. I was really pleased as I knew the next section was a bit tricky navigation wise and since Steve had done the route a few times I could get help with the directions.

After a 7min rest we were off again but I was finding it hard. We'd been running in the dark for over 8hrs and still had another 3-4hrs of darkness to go. I was so thankful to be running with Steve and he too seemed happy with the company. We slightly lost the path on the way up to Cook's Monument arriving from a slightly different direction.

There was a few miles of downhill and flat running and I got going again and was running stronger again. Steve and I passed the time chatting about all sorts of things. He told me all about his first job on a trawler and his work in a car home now.

There is an out back section up Roseberry Topping so it gave us the opportunity to see how far the runners ahead were. On the way up we saw the guys who had over taken us quite a while back and we saw Luke still running well. At the top of Roseberry Topping sitting in his tent was Dez. The previous week Dez had run a 100k International race at Keswick so it was good to be able to congratulate him on his run.

As Steve and I made our way off Roseberry Topping we couldn't see anyone coming up or in the distance so we knew we were well ahead of the rest of the runners. The next section to Saltburn through Guisborough Woods I'd been told is the trickiest of the whole route. Last year Steve told me he'd got completely lost and ended up at a farm so I was hoping we'd be all right this time.

Dave, race organiser, had put tape through the woods to help us and we faithfully followed it until we came to a point when it had ran out or more accurately we went the wrong way. We ended up running a parallel path to the right one but we came out at the right point so we were happy.

Matt and Leanne were waiting for us at the Fox and Hounds. They were looking very cold having been waiting for a while. Once again I was very grateful for their support. We stopped to refill our water and take some food. We had 5miles to go to the coast and the sun was coming up so suddenly everything felt so much better. It's amazing the difference running in the light made so our spirits. The head torches were switched off and we could look around and see where we were going.

We arrived at Saltburn-on-Sea at 7.17am. We had run the first 55 miles in 12hrs 11mins which was right on my sub 28hr schedule. We stopped for a few minutes. Steve's support team were waiting for him and Matt and Leanne were looking a lot happier, still cold but happier.

I changed my top and left as much gear as possible. I set off feeling really good. The sun was shining and I had what I thought was the easier half to do. 55 miles running down the coast to Filey. How hard could that be? I was soon to find out!

Steve and I ran along the coastal path towards Runswick Bay which was 12miles away. It felt so good to be running along the grassy path with the sea on our left. It was clear that Steve was going very well and he was setting the pace. I was comfortable enough but I wondered how long I could stay with him.

One of things I was finding hard about this race was not knowing what was coming. On the whw route because I've run it so many times I know every twist and turn. I know when to walk, when to run, how far the next checkpoint is. On this race I had no idea. I knew that the next checkpoint was 12miles away and I was aiming to run it in 2hrs 45mins but I didn't know whether that was reasonable or even possible.

One of the tings I'd decided to do for this race was to take a photo of myself every 30mins and put them all together as a video diary to give an impression on the length and variety of the race. A few weeks before the race I'd seen a similar thing from a German guy who had walked across China and taken a photo every day. He was an art student and did it as a project. It was amazing as he was in the same position for every photo. Over the 5min video diary he changed dramatically and the scenery behind him. So I thought I'd try something similar for this race.

I'm not sure if it worked but it did help me on the day as every 30mins my watch bleeped; I paused, took the photo and then carried on. It gave a routine to the run and also stopped me from looking at my garmin watch to see how far I'd run as I only allowed myself to check once I'd taken the photo.

The miles did eventually pace and Runswick Bay was getting closer but with each mile Steve was opening up little gaps as I struggled to stay with him. I told him to push on but he said let's stay together to Runswick Bay and then we'd see. I was determined that I wanted him to run his own race as he was going so well.

It was getting very warm by now and I'd run out of water. It's a horrible feeling, being thirsty and not having anything to drink. There were a good number of people on the path and they must have realised a race was going on as a few asked me how far we'd come. When they realised we'd been

running since 7pm the night before and had started at Helmsley they were impressed. They probably thought we were mad but impressed.

I asked one couple whether they had any water. They were so kind and gave me their water bottle and wished me well for the rest of the run. I had a feeling I was going to need lots of support to get me to the end.

Matt and Leanne were waiting for me at Runswick Bay and I decided to have a decent stop for 10mins to give me time to refuel and rest. I knew Steve was looking forward to his drink of Brevil here and was changing shoes.

I was ready to go before Steve but I knew he would soon catch up and I was hoping he'd then push on. The first section is along the beach and then there is a climb back up onto the path. I was on my own for the first time in ages and I tried to find my own rhythm.

I was using all my motivational quotes to keep going. On the car journey down Matt had started reading, 'Born to Run' and he read out one of the quotes in that book, 'Make pain your friend and you will never be lonely.' I thought on that and even though I was on my own I wasn't lonely as pain was right there with me!

After about 40mins Steve caught me, continuing to run really well. After a quick word or two he was off and we wished each other all the best for the rest of the race. By the end of the race Steve had caught three runners in front and ended up 3rd in 24hrs 23mins which was an incredible run. The most impressive thing to me was that he ran the first 55miles in 12hrs 10mins and then the second 55miles in 12hrs 13mins. Amazing consistency. I'd like to think I helped in some ways by holding him back until 72miles so that he didn't burn out too quickly!

Once Steve had gone past me I had another 5miles or so to Whitby. One of my friends from the whw, Martin, was manning that checkpoint and I was looking forward to seeing him. As I approached Sandsend Matt came out to see how I was doing. Leanne and Matt were getting concerned as to how I was going and felt I needed the extra support and they were right. It was good to see him.

I walked and ran through Sandsend and then realised it was only 3miles to Whitby. I went past the golf course and could see the Whitby Abbey in the distance. It was strange running through a packed Whitby, having to dodge past shoppers and tourists out for a stroll along the narrow streets.

I came to the 199 steps leading up to the Abbey, put my head down and walked as fast as I could. I couldn't help chuckle when I went past one young couple who said, 'you'd think they'd put an escalator up here!'

Leanne was waiting for me and then Martin arrived to take me round to the checkpoint which was around and behind a building. I sat for a few minutes, changed my top, had something more to eat and then was ready to get going again. Martin had written on a white board the times of the runners ahead. He reckoned I could catch some of them but I knew I was slowing and that the next 35miles was going to be hard.

As I set off I thought about how far I had to go. 11miles to Ravenscar, 11miles to Scarborough and then the final 12miles to Filey. I was still running just but I knew that I would probably have to

walk the majority of the way. If I could walk at 3miles an hour then it would take me It took a while to work out ... 11hrs! I've already been going for over 17hrs and still had another 11hrs to go.

I tried not to think about that but to concentrate on the next 30mins until my next photo. When I was looking at the maps and profile of the race I knew that there would be some ups and downs on this coastal path but I didn't realise how tough it was going to be.

Every inlet there were steps down and steps back up. Time after time the same process and after each one I felt my legs were getting more tired. The steps were taking their toil on my legs.

By now I was walking more than running. Whenever there was a down hill section I made myself run but it was more of a shuffle than a run and if there was so much as an tiny up hill I was walking. My mantra was 'one step at a time and you will get there eventually.'

By the time I reached Robin's Hood Bay I knew it was going to be a long, long race. To make matters worse I couldn't see Matt and Leanne. A quick phone call revealed they were at the bottom of the hill so I made my way down there.

Matt suggested I change into my road shoes and said that he was going to run with me as I could now have a support runner. So after a short break which was nowhere near long enough I was off again.

It was great to have some company again and Matt was just the right person to help me. We have run a lot together and enjoy each others company so we he knew what to say and do to keep me going. He even coaxed a few runs out of me for the next hour or so.

One of the things about this coastal path was being able to see for miles ahead where you were going. As we looked down the coast it went on for miles and the distance and what we had to do was there to see. We could see Ravenscar Hotel, the next checkpoint, in the far distance. It seemed to take ages to reach it but we did and Leanne was there patiently waiting for us.

I was only wearing my vest as it had been pretty hot all day. Leanne asked me whether I needed a change and I said 'no, I'm fine.' Once I left the checkpoint I suddenly realised that the next checkpoint, Scarborough was 11miles away which would take us at least 3hrs 30mins which given that it was now 3pm it would after 6.30pm and it would be getting dark and cold. Fortunately Matt was wearing a long sleeved top and a jacket so I took the jacket!

It was a long, long way to Scarborough and I was finding it hard. Matt did his best to raise my spirits but it was a case of just keep going. We resorted to competitions like guessing how many steps there were on the way down and the way up. Matt was winning all of those but at least it passed the time.

It was a long 4hrs but eventually we did reach Scarborough. I had been going for almost 25hrs now, it was dark and I was going into the second night. This was the longest I'd ever been going and I knew the next 12 miles was going to be tough. I couldn't run anymore but felt that if I could walk at 3miles per hour then I could still make it under 29hrs.

To be honest by then the time didn't matter too much. I was just concentrating to getting to the finish as soon as I could. After stopping for a few minutes to put some warm clothes on and have

something to eat we were off again. I knew I could keep going for 12miles and then I could tick off this ultra.

We walked to the end of Scarborough and then our troubles started. We couldn't see where the Cleveland Way path went. The map I had wasn't too clear and I didn't have the course description that Dave had given us.

It looked like the path was higher up so we made our way up to the higher road. Once there we still couldn't find it. I was taking less and less interest in the decision making. I felt I had enough energy to walk the final 10 miles but not much energy for anything else. Matt ran Dave, the race director, and tried to get directions. While he was doing that I lay down on the grass for a rest. It was probably the worse thing to do as when I got up I felt really cold and everything was seizing up.

We walked back towards Scarborough looking for the Car Park Dave mentioned but it obviously wasn't the one we were looking for. We ran Dave again and he said he would come back from Filey and show us the way. I realised that this would take another 30mins or so and by then I'd be even colder and more fed up.

Suddenly I thought I could stop. I'm not sure where it came from as it hadn't even entered my thoughts. I'd always thought that I wouldn't stop in an ultra race unless I was injured. But I felt that I had a legitimate reason. I was lost, cold and fed up. I reasoned that I didn't need to finish this race. I have nothing to prove to anybody. I'd already run 100miles which is a major achievement in its own right.

I then told Matt I was stopping. To make matters final I even stopped my stop watch and decided we could get a lift back from Dave when he came to show us the way. I felt relieved that I wasn't going to have to walk the final section. I was looking forward to a shower, something to eat and a bed.

I sat on a bench over looking Scarborough and tried not to think about anything. Suddenly my mobile phone rang. It was my friend Gordon. I'd spoken to him earlier in the day when I was feeling a lot more positive. To be honest if I was holding the phone I might well have switched it off but Matt had it as he'd been speaking to Dave. So I didn't have a choice.

I explained to Gordon that I was lost in Scarborough, that I was cold and that my body was shutting down so I'd decided to stop. Gordon hadn't finished the whw the previous year and I knew that it had taken him over a year to really get over it and even now he regrets stopping. So I was expecting him to try and persuade me to carry on but I did think he would show some sympathy to my situation, which I felt justified stopping.

Over the next few minutes Gordon told me in no uncertain terms to finish. He told me I wasn't injured and most importantly the pain of not finishing would be far greater than any pain I might have to go through to finish. He reminded me of all our friends who had finished the whw race in far worse state that I was in. Even as he spoke I was thinking but my situation is different.

I thanked Gordon for calling but I was still 90% certain I was stopping. I did promise to think about it though. As I switched off the phone Matt saw the 10% chance and suggested we went for a walk to see how I felt. As we walked up the road I was surprised that I didn't feel as bad as I thought I would. I realised that one of my main reasons for stopping, namely my body was shutting

down wasn't true. I asked Matt what would he do and he replied, 'I'm a stubborn b*gger and I would carry on.' He also added that Leanne is the same. By then I knew that Leanne was coming in the car with Dave and was prepared to walk in with us.

So I said to Matt, Okay, 'Let's do it.' Just then my mobile phone rang again and it was Gordon, 'I'm going to ring every 5mins until you tell me you are going on.' He went on for a few more minutes with more arguments that he'd thought of. When he stopped for a breathe I said to him that I was going on! For the first time he was speechless but pleased with my decision.

Whenever grandad told me this story his eyes always filled with tears and when I asked him why he always replied that he was struck by the friendship shown to him on that cold night in September. Matt and Leanne had given up a whole weekend to support him, had been up right through the night and the day and were now prepared to walk another 10miles through a second night just so he could finish this race.

Plus Gordon miles away in his house was so determined that grandad didn't have to go through the same struggles he'd faced the year before when he'd dropped out of the whw race. That according to grandad was true friendship, wanting the best for your friend and determined to help them avoid the experience of a dnf (did not finish).

It was one thing to agree to carry on it was another to have to do it. Dave and Leanne arrived in the car. Dave showed us the path and the ironic thing was we weren't far from the right path. Leanne had decided at the last minute to walk with us and hadn't had time to bring all she needed so she was wearing her road shoes, didn't have a head torch and not enough warm clothes.

It was going to be a long 10miles but we set out with a mind set of, 'let's get this done.' Matt and Leanne led the way and I followed as best I could. I was surprised that I was walking more easily than I thought possible an hour or so ago. It made me realise once again that we have far more reserves and can go so much further than we think we can. If we agreed to our mind and stop then there is always more to come. I couldn't run but I could walk and walk we did.

The path went through some woods, onto the road and then back down to the coast. We walked along the coast with the sea on our left for ages. We came to a caravan park and I thought we must be getting close to Filey by now. We continued on and walked and walked. We weren't chatting much. We were all in our own world's doing what needed to be done. I was trying to concentrate to staying ahead and kept telling myself that if I could keep putting one foot in front of the other then I would get there.

The Hardmoors route takes you out to Filey Brigg and then back into Filey. The lowest point for me was when we came round a corner thinking that Filey must be close only to see these lights way in the distance off to the right and what made it worse was we were heading away from the lights. But we kept going and the lights did get closer minute by minute.

A few times I was literally falling asleep on my feet. I had to close one eye to try and concentrate on the path. I stumbled a few times but somehow kept going. At one point we stopped to check the way. There was a large stone seat nearby so Matt and I sat down and then lay down and we could easily have fallen asleep but Leanne put on her teacher's voice and got us moving again.

Eventually after what seemed hours we reached the checkpoint at Filey Brigg and then head back down into Filey. Nothing was straight forward for us that night and as we followed the markers

Dave had left to find the way to the Finish centre we lost our way and wasted a few more minutes trying to get back on track.

We arrived at the finish at 2.17am 31hrs 11mins after leaving Helmsley. I had done it but I knew that it was only possible with the support from Matt and Leanne and I thanked them for helping me to get to the end.

At the finish Steve and Luke and others were waiting for me to congratulate me on finishing. It hit me then that I was so glad I got to the end as any excuse I'd would have had to offer would have sounded pathetic.

Grandad went on to tell me that he ran the both the Hardmoors 55, that started in March 2010, and the Hardmoors 110 a number of times in the next few years. Grandad particularly enjoyed the shorter race as it was run during the day and so he could see the tremendous views.

Over the years the race got bigger and grew in stature. The course record was broken by Dickie when he won the race in 2013 on his third attempt at the race. Dez Trigg then ran the race the following year and promptly lowered the record to 21hrs 24mins.

Chapter 15

UTMB

The second race that grandad said was he favourite after the whw race was the Ultra Tour Du Mont Blanc. This was a race that grandad had wanted to do for many years before he was able to finally tackle it himself. The race starts and finishes in Chamonix in Switzerland and then follows in an anticlockwise direction the Mont Blanc massif passing through France and Italy before coming back to Chamonix to complete the 103miles. There are over 29,000ft of climbing and descending, more than Mt Everest.

A number of grandad's friends had completed the UTMB but for various reasons grandad wasn't able to do it until 2019 when he was 60. This was to be the big challenge of the year. He used the whw race that year as part of his training and was determined to see if he could complete this race in under 40hrs.

I was only 4 when he attempted this race but years later it was as fresh in grandad's mind as it was on the day he started

'A group of us from Scotland had decided to do the race and we had travelled out a week early to acclimatise and prepare ourselves. Our group included Samantha who I'd had lots of battles with on the whw, Alberto & Bethie, Marc's parents and great friends from the whw, Ulrich & Sabine who had both completed the whw race several times. Matt and Leanne had hoped to join us but Matt was away on duty in his sub and couldn't make it in the end.

We had all prepared as well as we could and were like kids in a sweet shop waiting for the start of this race that we'd been talking about and preparing to run for quite a few years. We had discussed all sorts of options for clothes, food, footwear, the best way to prepare and now we were about to start. It was too late to change our minds about anything but it didn't stop us wondering if we had the right gear, had the right food on route in our drops bags and whether we really would be able to cope with the relentless climbing we knew was coming.

There are over 2,000 runners and thousands more watching as we set off on the first leg of just over 19miles which includes 4,765ft of climbing and 4,355ft of descending. It takes a few minutes of walking to get through the start and to find enough room to get running. We had decided to start together and see how it goes but we all knew fine well that Alberto and Ulrich would not be able to resist the urge to push on and we were not disappointed. They were both sub 18hr whw runners after all so we expected them to be near the front.

I ran with Samantha and Bethie with Sabine not too far behind us. Sabine had her own goals in mind and they didn't involve going off too quick. She as determined to get to the finish inside the cut-off time and knew what she had to do.

Les Houches was reached quickly enough after 4 or 5 flattish miles. We all enjoyed the support of all the locals who were out in support. As we passed they shouted 'allez allez' and 'bon courage.' We appreciated these calls of support more and more throughout the race especially as we grew more tired. The locals really were an inspiration in the race. As you run out of the darkness up a mountain into a tiny hamlet in the middle of the night the residents are out shouting your name and urging you on. The first few times it happened Samantha couldn't work out why they knew her name until Bethie pointed out it was written above her race number.

The vast majority of the runners use poles to help them up the mountain and down the other side. This too had been a fierce debate amongst our group, whether to use them or not. Only Alberto and I were against them while the others thought it was crazy not to. I had tried to use them but found they were more bother than anything. All you could hear was the click click of the poles as a long line of runners made their way up to La Charme.

Once we were over the top we had the first of 9 long descents down to Saint Gervais. It was good to be heading down but we all knew that it was the descents that really hurt the quads in the long term so we tried to take it as easy as possible. By the time we arrived in Saint Gervais it seemed as though the whole of the town was out cheering the runners through. There was a food station here so we stopped for a few minutes to refill our water bottles and eat some cake.

It was very dark by now and we knew we had a 6mile 1,180ft climb up to Les Contamines. The route was pleasant enough with a mixture the odd steep switchback climb and lots of forest and agricultural trail running.

By the time we arrived at the checkpoint at La Contamines and had passed through the high tech bar code reader it looked like a field hospital with a number of casualties all lying around. Some were getting blisters dressed and others a massage. I remember thinking if they are struggling after 19miles what chance have they got of making 103miles.

I was still running with Samantha and Bethie and spent a few minutes here eating the first of a number of bowls of salty noodle soup. It didn't taste the best ever but it did warm us up and give us the knowledge that we were replacing the salt we were losing on the trail.

The stretch to Notre Dam de la Gorge was easy going but when we arrived we thought we'd stumbled into a race party with purple lights and a sound system to die for pumping out music for miles around. It was quite surreal but it was soon forgotten as we headed sharply up the steep natural stone slabs and outcrops that marked the 1,970ft ascent to La Balme.

It was a long climb up and the three of us worked together, taking turns to lead. It was good to be able to support and help each other as we climbed. It was getting colder and colder, not surprising really when you realise we were over 6,000ft in the middle of the night. We were all glad we'd brought lots of layers as needed each and every one. Bethie laughed at one point and then explained that Alberto had decided to leave behind his warmest top as he didn't want the extra weight! 'I bet he wished he'd listened to me now,' Bethie said.

There was a bonfire at La Balme and we could easily have stayed there longer but we knew we had to press on and so after refilling our water and food supplies we were off again into the night and what was to be the first really proper climb of the night. 2,460ft into cloud up a steep, rocky trail. To make it even harder it was raining now and all we could see was the rain drops falling in front of our eyes.

So head down, counting my steps or breathes and listening to the click click of the poles in the dark we made our way slowly up the mountain. The air was getting thinner and we could feel the effects on our bodies. Every step seemed that much harder and we were breathing far harder than we thought we should be.

We reached the top of the pass and then began the long descent down. We could sense the vast views all around but could only make out the outlines in the dark. On the way down to the checkpoint at Croix Du Bonhomme Samantha and Bethie pushed on and I was on my own for the first time since the race began several hours ago. It was good to be able to regroup a bit and go through my checklist of how I was feeling. Overall I was happy with how the race had started but I knew there was a long, long way to go. I had the rest of this night, the whole of Saturday and right through Saturday/Sunday night.

I took my time on the very steep, technical, slippery mud and rock descent to Les Chapieux. A number of people went past me but I didn't want to go any faster as I knew my quads would pay for it later on. It was interesting being in a race with so many runners. In the dark you can see head torches ahead and behind all through the night. You do feel part of such a big event.

I arrived at the Les Chapieux checkpoint just ahead of my schedule. As I grabbed some food I saw Samantha and Bethie just about to leave so I gave them a wave and thought I'd try and catch them on the next long 3,100ft climb up to Col de la Seigne (8,252ft).

The first stage of the climb was up a gradual winding tarmac road. I was on my own but all around I could hear various runners chatting away in various different languages. The climb was long and to make it worse I kept thinking I was at the top only to discover another false summit and another climb to make. The altitude was taking it's toll making me feel very sleepy. I would have been quite happy to stop, curl up and go to sleep.

The one thing that did keep me going though was that it was getting lighter and the black was turning to grey and rocky shapes and mountains began to appear. It was an amazing feeling to crest the Col de la Seigne in the growing light of dawn. I caught up with Samantha and Bethie just before the top and we all agreed this was why we wanted to do this race. The downside though was the arctic blast of wind channelling up the valley from Lac Combal that hit us, instantly removing all body heat. It did act as a slap in the face though and certainly woke us up from our stupor.

We stopped for a few minutes to put on our jackets but we were soon on our way down to the Lac Combal checkpoint at 6,460ft. Once again Samantha and Bethie pulled away but now it was light I

could always see them and we caught up with each other at the checkpoint, when we stopped for more noodle soup and hot drinks.

Our hands were still quite numb in the high altitude cold. We knew it was going to get hotter but right now we still needed our hat and gloves. After a few minutes rest our legs took a few minutes to respond to action but we were soon running along the high, perched alpine valley on a rough road raised above pools of crystal clear water on either side. The path soon left the road and we were climbing once again up the 1,525ft climb to Arete Mont Favre, a tiny little tent of a checkpoint perched above Lac Combal and Courmayeur at 7,990ft.

The views of the Mont Blanc massif were stunning in the early morning sun. We paused for a couple of minutes to soak it in and take some photos. We knew they would never do justice to the scene before our eyes but we wanted to try. We then set off on the long descent to the mid-point of the race distance wise at Courmayeur.

As had been the pattern over the last few descents Samantha and Bethie pushed on working together down the hill. To be honest I was quite glad of a bit of peace as those two can talk for Scotland. It took ages getting down the 2,500ft of straight descent down the narrow trails. I need to concentrate on not slipping off the path as there was a very steep drop down.

Eventually I hit the bottom and through what looked like a swing park before reaching the narrow old style streets of Courmayeur. It was a beautiful town and I made myself the promise that I'd come back with Katrina and spend some more time looking around. It was a real confidence booster to get to half way and still be feeling okay. Obviously my legs were sore as I'd run over 50miles but I knew I had plenty left and that I was going to make it.

I found my drop bag pretty quickly and restocked my rucksack with essential supplies. I tried not to spend too long at the checkpoint as the atmosphere was very inviting and it would have been very easy to stay for a lot longer. I found Samantha and Bethie and the three of us set off once more together. We ran through Courmayeur town centre then walked up the ever steepening road to the monster 2,620ft ascent to Refuge Bertone in steadily increasing heat.

The path to the top is a never ending dusty switchback forest trail. The skyline always seems above you and seems to be just once more switchback but in reality there is always another one, then another one. It took us a good while to reach the top and I'd opened up a bit of a gap on the two girls but I suspected they would soon catch up again on the descent.

I headed out of Bertone to begin the high level trail run past Refuge Bonatti (6,625ft) then down to Arnava (5,800ft). The wild life was interesting and I saw some deer on the route. Once again our differing paces showed up and firstly Samantha, then a few minutes later Bethie caught me. It was the first time I'd seen any distance between them and I wondered whether they had started to seriously race each other.

Samantha and Bethie are great friends and have known each other since their teens. They both really got into ultra running about 12yrs ago and have had many battles on the whw since. In the 6 races they have both done together they are tied at 3 races each so maybe this is seen as the decider.

By the time I reached the Arnuva checkpoint both Samantha and Bethie had been and gone. I did wonder whether I'd see them again but decided I couldn't do much about it. If they came back fine, otherwise I'd run my own race and get on with it.

After some more salty noodle soup I was away again preparing myself for the steep slope. It eased off for a bit before the main 2,520ft climb to the Grand Col Ferret at 8,321ft which is the highest point on the race. I could just about see Samantha and Bethie ahead so decided to concentrate on reeling them in. When they went past a marker I noted how long it took me to reach that same point. I repeated this several times until it was clear I was slowly catching them.

It took me a good while but catch them I did. It felt good to be back together at the top. We then had a long 3,100ft descent to La Fouly. This time I was determined to try and stay with them and we kept a good pace going all the way down. We took turns leading and it proved a good tactic as no-one else overtook us on the whole stretch.

By the time we reached the road our legs were pretty shot so we walked for a bit and then raised the effort to run into the checkpoint, milking the cheers of the crowd. Everyone seemed to give the girls an extra loud cheer so I enjoyed the praise as well though as Bethie pointed out it wasn't for me!

We heard at La Fouly that Alberto and Ulrich were still together and going well. They, too, had many battles over the years but it looked like they were working together and supporting each other on this one. Either that or they planned to have a race over the last 10k. You can never tell with those two.

The most dangerous bit of the whole race comes in the next 18mile section to Trient. We were still slightly ahead of our 40hr schedule and we were determined to try and stay ahead or even increase it slightly if possible. We kept up a good pace along the gradually descending forest trail. We overtook a number of runners which always raises your spirits.

The trail then became a ledge, perched a good hundred feet or more up a cliff face, sometimes sheer, sometimes a steep forested slope. If you tripped and went over at this point there was no coming back. Neither Samantha nor Beth were at their best with heights so I led the way and encouraged them not to look down.

Thankfully no-one did trip and we soon found ourselves in the beautiful Swiss alpine village of Praz De Fort. There were more people out supporting the runners and their encouragement was really appreciated, especially as we had another 1,000ft climb to Champex Lac. The light was fading now and we were about to go into our second night. This is when it gets tough mentally. I had been training as much as I could to prepare for a second night as I knew that this was going to be the key part of whether I succeeded or not.

Katrina and Emma had come with us to support where they could and to have a holiday! We knew they would be waiting for us at Champex and so we plodded on looking forward to seeing them. Sure enough we saw them cheering as loud as they could. They helped the three of us prepare for the second night. They made sure we put on more warm clothes and had spare batteries for our head torches. They gave us hot drinks and generally made sure we were ready for the final push through the night.

Katrina and Emma walked with us through Champex until we headed into the forest leading to the 3rd last climb, up the hill called Bovine. We were slightly concerned that we were going down when we wanted to go up but eventually the trail the right direction and we started ascending.

Bovine was a tough, tough hill to climb. We knew it was the 3rd last hill but had no idea how long it would take. It turned out to be hours and each of us was lost in our own worlds. Doing what had to be done to put one foot in front of the other. Even Samantha and Bethie weren't talking. As we made our way slowly up the hill we passed a number of runners who had stopped to rest by the side of the path. While it was tempting to join them we all knew if we stopped now we might not get going again.

The trail up Bovine was hardly a trail at all. It was just a jumble of large, awkward boulders which made it really hard to get into any rhythm. It took a lot of effort to lift my foot high enough to climb over each boulder. I seem to be going better than the girls and they were working hard to stay with me.

Eventually we came out of the forest and reached the Bovine checkpoint at 6,520ft. More salty noodle soup and we were off to tackle the 3rd last big descent – 2,250ft straight down a hard rocky path to Trient with hardly any switchbacking at all. Now it was my turn to try and hang onto Samantha and Bethie as they powered their way down the hill. They seemed to have a new lease of life whereas I was very definitely dragging out every last bit of energy from my tired body.

By the time we reached the Trient I was very tired and in need of something hot to drink. Thankfully there was some hot chocolate which warmed me up at 2am in the morning. Even at this hour there were spectators around to cheer on the runners. This is truly an amazing race to take part in and I'm not surprised people want to come back. The pain of the run will soon fade but the tremendous atmosphere of the race will last for ever.

We said goodbye to Trient and the spectators we spoke to and headed out, a bit reluctantly as we were leaving the warmth of the checkpoint for the cold of the night and the prospect of the 2,580ft climb up to Catogne. I told myself to dig deep, we're nearly at Vallorcine. When we arrived a week before the race the first day out we had hiked/run from Vallorcine to Chamonix so I knew what was coming. There would be no more surprises.

I tried to eat some more gels and sweets and joined a train of runners heading up the switchback climb. I was ahead of Samantha and Bethie, trying to keep a steady pace going. There were a group of 3 guys who kept powering past me, but would then stop for a rest. As they paused I'd go past them at my steady pace. They would then power past once more only to stop for another rest. This pattern was repeated a few more times before I made the top, which came after a number of false summits.

I was determined to try and stay ahead of the 'power three' as I called them and set off down the hill towards Vallorcine. What a descent it was as well. 2,460ft of what seemed to be randomly curving trail which left me totally confused. What direction was Vallorcine? Where were the lights? It was hard enough to be tired and sore but it felt very cruel to see the lights and then they would disappear as we went round another corner only to show themselves again but they never seemed to get any nearer.

Just when I thought I couldn't go much further Samantha caught me up and encouraged me to keep going. It's not far now to Vallorcine she said. Thankfully she was right and we soon reached the back of some wooden huts and made our way to the village that looked like a field hospital.

There were a number of runners receiving treatment for all sorts of injuries from blisters to cuts and bruises. Others were having a massage to relieve very sore and cramping muscles. Looking around I suddenly felt a lot better. 'I'm not as bad as most of these guys' I thought. Bethie had caught us at the checkpoint so the three of us drank some more salty noodle soup and we were off once again.

We plodded up to the Col de Montets and then began the last big 2,850ft climb to La Tete Aux Vents. The three of us were determined now to push on and break that 40hr mark. We were so close and it was within reach. It had been my dream to do this race and aim for that time. I was very tired but was willing to push myself right to the end. Samantha and Bethie were equally focused so we agreed together to help each other right to the end.

So we upped the pace as much as we could as we arrived at La Flegere, the last checkpoint before Chamonix. The first of the last section is down. But it is down with a capital D. A very, very steep track at first which then went into the technical switchback trail down, down to Chamonix. It was amazing following Samantha and Bethie. All through the race they had been the stronger runners downhill but now with only miles to go I decided to stay with them and let them pull me along.

I know there is no way I would have been able to run as fast on my own as it's so much easier just hanging on to someone in front. As we came to the foot of the hill where its spits you out into the streets of Chamonix Katrina was waiting to give us a saltire to run to the finish with.

The three of us ran side by side and even though I was born in Liverpool I felt proud to be running under the Scottish flag. The crowds were amazing as we ran through the streets to the finish. I was feeling very emotional as were Samantha and Bethie. We reached the finish line in 39hrs 48mins 37secs. We had done it and as we received our finishers gilets noir the three bust into tears of joy and relief it was over.

I had heard so much about this race and now I understood what all the fuss was about. We met up with Alberto and Ulrich who had finished together just over 6hrs before us. Sabine also made it inside the time limit so we all returned to Scotland very happy.'

Grandad only did the race that once but I have plans to do it one day and I can't wait to see 'what the fuss is all about' and I'm sure I'll be thinking about my grandad the whole way round.

Chapter 16

Final Marathon

Out of all the races that grandad told me about there was one more race that stood out for him. It was a marathon that he ran in 2015 and it was the slowest one he had run but it was also one of the most special and meaningful. That was because he ran it with one of his daughters, Emma, my aunt. One day I asked Emma to tell me what it was like and I'm glad I did.

'I grew up around running. I loved being part of 'Team Kynaston' on the whw race and realised that there were lots of people like my dad who ran crazy distances and seemed to enjoy it, though looking at my dad feet after the first whw race I wondered why.

When I started University I thought it would be a good idea to do some running and get. I started running with my friend Nancy who I worked with in a part time job at a jewellery shop. After a few weeks we decided to enter the Women's only 10k in Glasgow.

I did some training but according to my dad, not enough. I finished in just over an hour and realised that I quite enjoyed running. The following year I had another go and this time I was even closer to breaking the hour and decided I wanted to try and train for a half marathon.

I was very apprehensive about whether I could run 13.1 miles and so asked my dad whether I could do it. He was a bit dismissive for my liking and kept saying that I could if I did the training. A few days later I asked him again and once more he said, yes if I did the training. I suppose I really wanted to hear that I could it without the training!

Anyway after a few more times of asking the same question my dad challenged me to start running at least three times a week and then he would give me a 15 week plan to tackle a half marathon. My dad found one in April 2010 which fitted in with my Uni studies and placements. I was on a B.Ed course training to be a Primary School teacher.

I found that I really enjoyed the training and had my schedule pinned to my bedroom door so I could tick off each session. Dad showed me some routes I could run on from home and my mum came with me for lots of the runs. Week by week I got stronger and could run further without having to stop. Dad, being dad, gave me the challenge of running the whole half marathon without stopping. I thought this was unnecessary but as the weeks went by I realised it might just be possible.

I can't say I did every single session on my training plan but I did do the majority and by the time I lined up in the Chris Hoy Half Marathon in Edinburgh I was ready to go and felt I would be able to run the whole way.

The atmosphere was amazing and I was caught up in the excitement of it all. I started off nice and steady as my dad recommended and was able to keep going right to the end. I had my name on my t-shirt and everyone was shouting for me to keep going. I have watched my dad run lots of races so it was great to be able to be the one doing the running this time.

I finished in a time just over 2hrs but most importantly I had run the whole way and felt quite emotional at the end. It was a great experience and I wanted to do it again. Maybe not for a few weeks or months but I would definitely do it again.

Over the next few years I did do some more half marathons and got under the 2hrs but in the back of my mind I really wanted to do a marathon. When I first mentioned it to my dad he immediately said he would do it with me and straight away went on line and registered us for the 2015 Loch Ness Marathon. I think he thought I might change my mind! There was no going back now and I knew I had just over six months to get ready. What had I done???

Once again my dad gave me a training plan which involved various sessions which he said would improve my stamina, fitness and speed. The key runs according to my dad were my long runs once a week. Looking at the plan I was build up from 6 miles to 22 miles by week 14 before two easier taper weeks. Once again the plan went on my bedroom door to be ticked off as I accomplished each week.

I was determined to be ready and my dad had promised to run with me and make sure I got to the end. The weeks went by and I faithfully ran my allocated sessions. Most of the time I was on my own but particularly on my longer runs I ran with my dad.

On one of the longer ones I asked him what does he think about when he's running. He told me one of his favourite stories about a book he read by James Cracknell and Ben Fogle. They rowed across the Atlantic in a race. Cracknell was an Olympic rower and double gold medallist and very competitive. Whereas Fogle was a TV presenter who loved to challenge himself to do all sorts of adventures but was not particularly bothered about how fast he got anywhere. They made an unlikely duo.

The race was gruelling as they basically rowed for 4hrs then rested for 4hrs for the 40 days it took them. One day Fogle asked Cracknell what did he think about in the middle of the night when he was half way through his shift, tired and all alone. Cracknell was surprised by the question and asked Fogle what did he think about. Fogle replied that he tried to get as far away in his mind from the boat and what he was doing. He thought about his girlfriend, his dogs, projects he's done, TV shows he's like to do. Basically anything to occupy his mind while he rowed for hours after hour.

Fogle asked Cracknell again, 'What do you think about?' Cracknell replied, I spend the whole time thinking about my technique. Am I rowing efficiently? I think about the pace. Can I go any faster? If I do how far will I have rowed on my shift? I spend the whole time thinking about the race and nothing else enters my head.'

My dad often used to tell that story and ask his running friends whether they are more like Cracknell or Fogle? He reckoned that most runners were a bit of both at different times. Dad thought that in a race he was more like Cracknell but in training he would be more like Fogle.

I realised that I was definitely like Fogle. I wore my iPod to listen to music and it helped to keep me going. Sometimes I even wore it when my dad was talking to me! As long as I nodded or said yes every now and then he was happy!

When the weekend of the Loch Ness Marathon came I was really nervous and full of doubts about whether I would be able to do it. My dad kept telling me that I'd done the work and now I just had to trust myself and get it done.

I travelled up with my Mum and Dad on the Saturday. We took a detour from Fort Augustus on the B862 around the south side of Loch Ness so we could see the route we would be running. As we passed the start there were lots of volunteers out getting it all ready. I've never seen so many portaloos before. I was starting to feel really nervous. The journey to Inverness from the start seemed to take for ages and I sat in the car thinking this is a long way to run!

When we arrived at the Queen's Park Stadium and I saw all the runners collecting their numbers, chips and goodies I felt such a fraud. Everyone looked so fit and ready to go whereas I just wanted to jump in the car and go back home. It didn't help that my dad seemed to know everyone and kept introducing me and telling everyone this was my first marathon and how proud of me he was. Dad's can be so embarrassing.

We went to our bed and breakfast, relaxed for a while then went to Pizza Hut for a pasta meal which my dad reckons was essential for the last meal before a marathon. We then went back to our bed and breakfast and watched some of X-factor that was still going strong after many years.

I woke at 4.30am with this foreboding sense of doom hanging over me. I had to run for 26miles 385yards and because I would be with my dad I couldn't walk! I dozed for a bit longer and then at 6.30am I got up, had a shower and changed into my running gear. I made sure my chip was facing the right way as the instructions said. I knew dad would check so I wanted to get it right.

I met dad for breakfast. Mum was running the 10k but that didn't start until later so she had a bit of a lie in. Dad looked relaxed and happy and was like a kid in a sweet shop. How can he be so enthusiastic I thought. Dad had his favourite pre race breakfast of porridge with honey and bananas. I struggled to eat some toast

Mum was up in time to take us to the stadium where we caught the buses back to the start. Dad explained that one year there was a problem with the buses and the whole race had to be delayed but thankfully they all left on time.

We had about 45mins to wait once we arrived at the start. While my dad met all his friends I went off and queued to use the portaloos. I didn't want to have to stop on the way if I could help it. I did a few gentle stretches and tried to look as calm as possible but inside I was panicking. I was like the ducks you see on the pond. All serene on the surface but paddling like mad underneath.

I could easily have slipped off home but I was 26 miles from Inverness and hundred's of miles from Paisley so I would have to do it. My dad found me and sensing my anxiety found us a quiet spot and gave me one of his pep talks. This time though it did help and by the time 10am arrived I was ready to go and run my first ever marathon.

It was all very exciting as we were marched to the start line by a piped band. We started near the back of the field but it didn't take too long to go through the start and our chips would record our running time so that was fine.

I was determined to start off nice and steady. On my long training runs I'd learnt that if you start too quick it really hurts at the end and I wanted this to be as pain free as possible. Anyway my dad had his special gps thingy to make sure we were at the right pace.

The first 4-5 miles was mainly downhill but there were quite a few up hills as well. I concentrated on keeping going and to my surprise I was really enjoying it. The weather was lovely, the scenery was beautiful and I didn't want to be anywhere else.

I took some water at the first station. Dad suggested we took one with a top still on so we could sip some water along the way. Dad went into one of his little rants about the waste of those who take a bottle of water, take a couple of sips and then throw it away. I listened and nodded but it did make the next mile pass quickly.

By the time we were running along the side of the Loch I was into my stride and felt as though I could run for ever. All my training had paid off and I felt really confident I could do this. It was good to be running with my dad though I didn't tell him that. I also enjoyed the banter of all the runners around me. Everyone was so encouraging and if anyone was having a hard time someone would say the right thing to keep them going.

We went through the half way mark in just over 2hrs which seemed fine to me. I know my dad wanted me to aim for 4hrs but I didn't really mind what time I did as long as I finished in one piece. There were a few people out on the course cheering us on but when we got to Dores at about 17miles there was a huge crowd all encouraging the runners.

As I ran through I felt like a real runner. I was doing this and only had another 9miles to go. The only problem was one of those miles was a big hill. My dad had been telling me about this hill since we started training for this race. On my long runs he insisted that we find a hill to run up to get me used to what I was about to face.

I knew that if there was any part of the route that I might be tempted to walk this would be it and so I tried to prepare myself for this hill. Like a lot of things the anticipation is often worse than the reality and yes it was hard and seemed to go on for ages but I made it without stopping, even passing a few people on the way up. Dad kept telling me how well I was doing but I knew myself that getting up that hill was a personal achievement.

When we reached the 5mile marker I was really happy as the end was in sight but my legs were feeling more and more sore. Each mile marker seemed to take for ages to arrive. As I approached the 24mile marker I couldn't remember whether it was the 23rd or 24th and I was so relieved to see it was the 24th and I only had two and a bit miles to go.

The route takes you around the back of the stadium and we could hear the announcer cheering people home. Not far now I kept telling myself. Not far, you can do it. The 26th mile marker came and I looked across at my dad who was beaming with pride. He's such a softie I thought.

We entered the stadium and ran down the last 100 yards to the finish side by side. The clock showed 4hrs 13mins 25secs as we passed through the line. I had done it. I was so tired and sore but I'd finished my first ever marathon. I gave my dad a massive hug and said, 'I'm never, ever doing that again!' He just smiled and said, 'Everyone says that but you'll be back.'

Grandad told me that he is proud of his pb (personal best) for the marathon but the memory of that one soon faded but the details of this marathon running with his daughter stays with him for ever. Medals and results as nice enough mementoes but the real rewards that we get from running are the experiences that we share with our friends, our families and the people that we meet along the way. They are the things that carry us into the future.

Chapter 17

Training

As I grew older and running took over my life I started to listen more and more to my grandad and he became my main coach. He had always helped me talk through what I was doing and even when I joined national squads and had access to world class coaches I always liked to talk through what I was doing with him.

One evening, not too long along before the 2040 Olympics, I sat down with grandad and I asked him, 'How did you train for all your ultras?' I wanted to know what he's learnt over many years of running long distance races and how it could help me in my preparation.

'In 2006 when I first heard about the West Highland Way Race I had no idea how to train for a race of 95miles off road. At that point the furthest I'd run was a marathon and I'd done a two day mountain marathon but I didn't really know what I was getting into. I read all the stories on the web site and could see that ordinary man and women had completed the race in various times but what I didn't know was whether I could do it.

I remember I sat down with a piece of paper and mapped out my training plan. Over the years it has developed into what works for me. One of the things that I discovered is that we are all different with different ideas, different time available and different goals so it's impossible to say there is one way to train.

For me there are certain key priorities to my training. Let me illustrate what I mean. I was a Pastor of a local church in Paisley for 7 years and one time in church I wanted to illustrate the importance of setting priorities. I brought out a jar with a wide mouth at the top and a dozen fist-sized rocks. One by one I invited people to put them in the jar until there was no room for any more.

I asked whether the jar was full and everyone replied, 'Yes.' I then took out a glass full of gravel and carefully placed it in the jar and shook it, causing the pieces of the gravel to work themselves into the spaces between the big rocks.

I asked again, 'Is the jar full?' This time they weren't quite so sure. I then brought out a glass of sand and dumped that into the jar until it filled up all the spaces left between the rocks and the gravel. Once more I asked whether the jar was full. This time the church knew the answer was no.

I then produced a jug of water and poured it in until the jar was filled to the brim. When I asked them what the point of the illustration was one person answered, 'No matter how busy you are if you try hard enough you can always fit more things in!' Good try but the answer I was looking for is that if you don't put the big rocks in first you'll never get them in at all.

This illustration could be used for a number of issues in our personal and professional life but as I relate it to my training for ultra running what are the big rocks that must have priority? What elements do I think I need to run ultras to be best of my ability?

The first big stone that needs to be in place is overall miles run. Before I started running ultras I was running about 25miles a week and aiming for 1,000miles a year. It was good enough to run half marathons and 10ks but I soon realised that I needed to run at least twice that to build up the stamina and time on my feet that I'd need for running the whw and other ultra races.

When I was training for my first whw race I averaged 40miles a week which looking back was probably the reason that my quads were so sore after 72miles and why I had to walk the last 23miles. But I don't think I could have done much more without causing injury. The following year I ran nearer 50miles a week and with the accumulated miles from the first year was able to run a lot stronger and further. For the next number of years I tried to make sure I ran at least 2,000 miles a year, sometimes getting over 2,500miles. For me anymore than this and it becomes counter productive. I know friends who run over 3,000 and even 4,000miles a year but I don't think my body could cope with that. It can be a fine line between not training enough and doing too much and picking up injuries.

The second big stone that needs to go in the jar is my long weekly/monthly runs. From that first year of training I realised that I needed to build up the distance I was running in training. I knew I couldn't just run 95miles straight away. I would need to build up slowly and increase the distance each month. Over the years I have found a pattern which works for me.

The key training months for me are January through to the whw race in June. At the end of each month I run a long section of the whw route. At the end of January it will be a 28mile run, then in February a 35mile run. In March I will increase it to 43miles and then I run in the Highland Fling Race which is 53miles. Four or five weeks later I will do a two day 75mile training run which involves 41miles on the first day and then 35miles on the second day.

I do the majority of these runs on the whw route which gives me the distinct advantage of getting to know the route better and better and being able to work on my pacing and splits throughout the route. It means by the time that I run the whw race in June I have covered the whole route at least three times in the last six months.

These long runs off road are one of the key factors in my training. The other advantage is being able to run them off road which is far better for my legs. I think if I tried to run similar distances on road I would have a lot more problems.

Another key stone in my training is variety. If I am going to be running 50miles or so a week then I need to make sure there is variety. So in my weekly plan I will do various sessions. I will do one fartlek session normally on a Monday night with my club. The term 'Fartlek' comes from the Swedish meaning, 'speed play.' A typical session will involve about 15minutes of easy running to warm up, followed by a series of strides before the main session. The main effort involves 30mins of hard running with a recovery between each hard run.

For example one session might be 2min run followed by 1min recovery, then a 3min run (90secs recovery), 4min on (2min recovery), 5min on (2min), 5min (2min), 4min (2min), 3min (90secs), 2min (1min), 1min (1min) 1min. Another night it would be 3mins on (90secs recovery) 10 times. Once the main part of the session is over we would have an easy 15min run back to the changing room.

There are a vast number of permutations and our coach at Kilbarchan has been through most of them. The advantage to these sessions is that for the 30mins you will be running a lot faster than you could if you ran 30mins in one effort. Most runners see their times improve if they put the effort in on these runs.

There is some debate as to the benefit of fartlek sessions for the ultra runner when speed is not really a factor. Personally I think there is great benefit from doing these sessions particularly in the first part of the year when the aim is to get fitter and stronger.

Another key session during the week is my tempo run. Again I would normally do this with the club on a Wednesday night. We would run between 9-10miles and aim to run at a pace faster than your anaerobic threshold, which is the pace where your body switches from mainly aerobic energy (with oxygen) to anaerobic energy (without oxygen when lactic acid is produced as a result). The aim is to be able to raise the pace of where that occurs and the only way to do it is to push the limit over a consistent time. If possible it is good to have this tested in a laboratory situation so you know where your limits are and what pace you need to run at.

I have done it a few times over the years and it is really helpful. The test is done on a treadmill and involves running to your maximum over about 30mins. I did it for the first time for my 50th birthday present. I went to Hampden and Dr Smith took me through the test.

Firstly I was weighed and my body fat taken. Then after a rest I was wired up so he could measure my heart rate throughout the test. I had to wear a face mask so Dr Smith could analyse how much carbon dioxide I was breathing out.

I started out running a very easy pace for 3mins. I then had to stop for a few seconds while a blood sample was taken to record the amount of lactic acid I was producing. The pace was then increased for the next 3mins and once again a small blood sample was taken. This process was repeated for another 5 or 6 times.

Dr Smith could tell by the lactic acid reading when I moved into anaerobic work. Once that point was reached I had to run to exhaustion. Every minute he raised the gradient of the run to make it harder. I pushed and pushed until I felt I was going to fall off the back of the treadmill.

After I had cooled down and had a shower Dr Smith talked me through the results. He said that my body was very efficient at burning fat which is ideal for an ultra runner. He also gave me targets to plan my training around. My easy recovery runs should be slower than 7mins 25secs per mile while my tempo runs should be between 6mins 55secs and 7mins 25secs per mile. This means that my fartlek sessions should be run quickly than 6mins 55secs.

I found it really helpful to have some clear numbers to work on. I had been running for many years by the time I had this test and it confirmed what I felt I knew. When I run quicker than 7mins 25secs I am breathing hard and know I'm into anaerobic work. I would have loved to have done this test when I was in my mid twenties and at my peak but better late than never.

I've done it a couple more times over the years and it is so helpful in planning how to train and race. I would certainly recommend it to anyone who is serious about their running.

Another key session in my week is my long slow run. As I already mentioned once a month this will be a long, long run but on the other weeks I will aim to do a long run of at least 15miles off road. I will try and increase the distance each week building up to the longer run at the end of the month.

So each week I will aim to do one fartlek session, one tempo session and one long slow off road run. Some weeks I will also do some work on hills, normally on a Friday. I will either run on my local park where I have a mile circuit which involves two up hills and two down hills. I will run this four times giving me lots of hills to run up and down! Or I will run on the road and find a hill which I can run up and down.

There is a very steep hill about a mile from our house in Paisley. I will use the mile getting there as a warm up, then work hard for the mile to the top of the hill. I normally carry on for another mile of undulating terrain before turning round and running back. The mile downhill is the key reason I do this route as it forces my muscles to adapt to running down hill which was one of the factors that stopped me running in my first ultra.

As I try and run six times a week that leaves me with two easy runs on Tuesday and Thursday. I read somewhere that most people 'run their easy runs too fast and their tempo runs too slow' so I do try and make sure my easy recovery runs are run easily.

I work on the hard easy principle of a hard session followed by an easier run. I find the variety of the sessions I do really helps with both motivation and pushing my body to be as fit as I can.

I have long recognised the fact that I'm getting slower as I get older but I'm determined to try and keep the slowing process as gradual as possible. I like to use the age graded charts that help you compare your performances as you get older.

The idea is that for a particular run you are given a percentage of the world record for that age group. So for example when I was 25 my half marathon time of 1hr 16mins 20secs would be 78% of the world record. Then when I'm 55yrs old my half marathon time of 1hr 27mins 42secs is 79% of the world record. So my performance at 55yrs old is actually better than my performance when I was 25yrs old even though it was over 11mins slower.

Another important stone in my training plan is the importance of rest. Making sure that I have regular easy weeks especially after a long run or ultra race. I learnt this lesson the hard way after my first ever ultra race in 2007 – the Highland Fling. I had been training hard for the Fling and the whw race for a number of months. I thought I had to be running further each week than I did the week before so week on week I was increasing my weekly mileage.

I ran the Fling on the Saturday and far exceeding my expectations of a sub 11hr goal by finishing in 10hrs 36mins. I was on such a high that I went along on the following Monday to the club with the intention of running at the back and not doing the Fartlek session. I just couldn't resist it and after half way I found myself near the front pushing hard and basking in the comments of my club mates who couldn't believe I'd run 53 miles just tow days earlier.

By the Thursday I felt a pain in my shin which basically grew worse in the days that followed. I had anterior tendonitis. For the next eight weeks I struggled to run and my participation in the whw was in doubt. I did manage to run but I learnt a very important lesson that year: the importance of rest. Running over 30miles in one go does take it out of your body, especially as you get older and it is vital that you give your body time to recover and rest.

So from then on I have worked on a four week pattern of three hard weeks with my long off road run at the end of the third week then an easy week to follow. I have had far fewer injuries as a result and I'm sure it's because I've kept to that pattern. I will also make sure that the two weeks following an ultra race are very easy weeks with only gently running.

Dr Smith explained to me when I had my fitness test that the two weeks after an ultra the body is most vulnerable to injury. I have kept that in mind and it has helped me keep running to my late 70's. The other thing that Dr Smith recommended after an ultra is to go swimming. He explained that the lactic acid in your muscles is like wax. If you leave it there by not doing any exercise then it will harden and take longer to shift. Whereas if you get the muscles working then the blood will flow through the muscles and the wax will melt and flow away.

It would be counter productive to run but swimming is ideal as it gets the blood flowing and removes the lactic acid without putting any weight on the muscles. This leads me on to the importance of cross training. I love to run and so for me it's never easy to do another form of exercise such as swimming or cycling but it is really beneficial. Many runners would feel the benefit of swapping one of their weekly runs for a cycle, a swim or a fitness class of some sort.

The final stone that I see as crucial is running technique. For a long time we were told to just run but many books have been written and articles published explaining the importance of working on your technique. If you consider how many times you will put one foot in front of the other in a 95mile race then it makes sense to try and do it in the most efficient way possible.

So in my training I try to work on my technique so that I am running as efficiently as possible. When I see pictures or videos of myself running I do realise that I have a long way to go and that maybe I'll never have an elegant running style but I try and improve what I've got. I work on the principle that it could be a lot worse if I didn't try!

In my career so far I have tried to take on board all of what my grandad has learnt and my training programme is based around these big stones. I feel if I can get those in place then everything will fall into line and I'll be a stronger and better runner.

Chapter 18

The Final Lap

As soon as I hit the ground I knew I was in trouble. The sound of flesh scraping along the ground and the instant shot of pain I felt throughout my body told me my race was over. Strangely the first thing I thought of doing was to stop my watch.

The crowd around me at that point all gasped together and the collective sigh and concern on their voices was clear to hear. I tried to protect my fall but as my whole body was tired after over 6hrs of hard running nothing responded quick enough and the damage was done.

I lay on the ground for what seemed like ages but in reality was only a few seconds. I was stunned and wasn't sure what to do. I realised that I was hurting but it was difficult to work out whether that was the pain of running or the extra pain of the fall.

I looked down and could see blood pouring from both my knees. I looked at my arm and again more blood coming from a cut below my elbow. I realised as soon as I tried to breathe that my chest was also sore.

By the time I got myself to my feet Marc had caught up and was about to stop, concern written all over his face. 'No you go on Don't stop Win this race for both of us' I shouted at him. Initially he was still going to stop but when he saw the look of determination on my face he reluctantly carried on. 'Go, Marc, go' was my last cry as he ran into the distance. All hopes of a medal disappeared with him.

With the crowd cheering me on I took a few tentative steps. My knees felt as though they were stiffening but I could move them. My elbow was fine but my I wondered whether I'd cracked a rib. But I could breathe and I could move so that is what I did. The crowd around me who had been watching in fascination cheered even more loudly as I moved away.

The news of my fall was being passed down the crowd so with each new corner the noise intensified. It got even louder when Abrihet went past me into 2nd place. The home crowd once more sensed a victory for Ethiopia after having resigned themselves to missing out.

Abrihet herself was full of sympathy and wanted to make sure I was okay. I told her I was fine and wished her all the best. I secretly hoped she wouldn't catch Marc but with the crowd on her side it was possible she would.

I battled on for another couple of kilometres. I started to wonder about the sense in keeping going as a few more runners went past me. Each and every one of them slowed enough to ask how I was and give me some encouraging words to keep going.

As I ran I thought about all the lessons my grandad had taught me. I knew it would be easy to stop and people would understand that I was hurt. I knew that any chance of a medal was now gone and as I'd set my goal on winning a gold medal it didn't really matter if I was 4th or 24th or dnf. But it would matter to me.

I thought about the story grandad told when he ran the Cleveland Hike as a 16yr old. They had done things differently. They had thought outside the box and won an event out of the blue. I realised that the expected thing was for me to stop. To get needed medical treatment and live to fight another day. But what if I thought outside the box? What if I did the unexpected and carried on?

I thought about grandad's struggle to break 3hrs for a marathon and how it took him several attempts to do it. He said that nothing worthwhile comes easy. If he'd broken 3hrs the first time he ran then he wouldn't have the same achievement. If I had won this race maybe I wouldn't fully appreciate the victory. Maybe the struggle of this race will make the next Olympics even sweeter.

I thought about the first ultra's that grandad had run and the sense of accomplishment and satisfaction he gained from finishing them even though everything was shouting at him to quit. I realised that the same sense of accomplishment and satisfaction could be mine if I made it to the end. I wouldn't have the gold medal or even the silver or bronze but I would have the satisfaction of knowing I'd finished the course. That I'd made it to the end despite my fall and injuries.

I thought too about the whw races that grandad had run. I remembered the many friends he met running on the route both on training runs and during races. The sense of being part of a wider family who had the whw race in common. There was the sense that if you didn't finish you were letting the family down. I thought of my mum and dad, my aunts and uncles, my brothers and cousins as well as my friends and knew deep down that they would want me to finish. To get to the end and know that I'd done my best. They would continue to love me no matter where I finished.

I thought back to the first Hardmoors race that grandad did. How he'd decided to stop because he was lost in Scarborough and was cold and tired. I remember how he spoke about his friends who told him to keep going. He was reminded that the pain of not finishing would last so much longer than any pain he was feeling now. So somehow he'd got going again and finished the race. He realised that they were right and the sense of accomplishment of getting it done was well worth the struggle of those last 10miles.

I knew that if I stopped now I would regret it. I'd come to Ethiopia, to the 37th summer Olympics to run the 100k race for GB and not to stop after 95k. I could do it and I would do it.

Finally I thought about the UTMB race that grandad had run. He and his friends had kept going for 40hrs. They were tired, sore and could easily have stopped but they kept going knowing that the

body can always do more than the mind tells it to do. I was still moving. I could finish this and I would finish it.

The crowd continued to give me as much encouragement as they could. They seemed to sense I was in turmoil about whether to go on and they wanted to do as much as they could to keep me going.

As I ran I remembered a conversation I'd had a few years ago with my grandad. I'd asked him what motivates him to run. He told me that a number of years ago some of his friends questioned his motivation. They thought that he received his motivation from beating others and that was the reason that kept him going and pushing hard.

He said that it caused him to really think about what motivates him. He realised that he is a competitive person but he also said that he didn't get his satisfaction from beating others. He explained that his satisfaction comes from doing the very best he can on any given day. That is the only thing that any runner can really control.

While it is fun to race against others and have your own rivalries whether that is for 1st place or 101st place the key thing is doing your best. My grandad often said that the reason he runs ultra races is that he loves to run. He loves the amazing scenery he runs through, the friends he's made and yes the challenge of seeing just how fast he can go.

As he has got older and inevitability started to slow down he had new challenges of trying to keep going and still running his best on any given day.

As I ran, slowly and with pain from my knees, elbow and chest I decided that the best I could do today was to finish. That would be my gold medal and so I gave myself a talking to and committed myself to getting to the end. My time was irrelevant. My position didn't matter. The only thing I focused on was trying to run the last few kilometres.

Other runners continued to go past me but now instead of worrying that I was losing yet another place I congratulated them and told them to push hard right to the end. They were full of support of me and again I took strength from each kind word and encouragement. Ultra running definitely brings out the best in people. We all know what it is to suffer and we all want to help and encourage each other as much as possible.

I was holding it all together until I saw my Uni friends at the 8k mark. I heard them before I saw them. I thought they had been shouting as loud as they could on the previous 9 laps but they were just warming up for this final effort. 'Go, Becky, Go' they shouted as if their lives depended on it. As I got closer I could see the concern on their faces but also love and compassion as they willed me to keep going and finish the race.

Instead of running past I decided to stop for a moment or two and thank them for their support. Another few seconds wasn't going to make any difference now. We had a group hug and they all told me they wouldn't have missed this for the world. I could have stayed there for ever but one of my friends told me in no uncertain terms to get going and finish this race.

They gave me their special GB flag they had been waving which had all their names on and mine prominent in the middle. I draped it round my shoulders and set off once more knowing I had less than 2k to go. When you think of 2k out of 100k it's nothing but I still had to do it. At the pace I

was shuffling it would take me another 12mins or so. I knew I could do it but it was still going to be hard keeping those feet stepping out in front of one another until I reached the finish line.

Still more runners went past. I'd lost count of where I was and I really didn't care. The minutes and metres ticked by and I saw the 1k to go banner. One kilometre I said to myself over and over again. I can run one kilometre.

As I approached the Olympic Stadium for the last time I could hear the cheers of each of the runners as they finished. I wondered whether Marc had held on or whether the local heroine Abrihet had managed to catch him? Some of the crowd had tried to tell me the result but it was so noisy I couldn't hear and thought I'd find out soon enough.

After what seemed like an age the Stadium doors appeared and I had a brief moment of calm as I ran through the tunnel. For a 20 metre stretch I was completely alone. Part of me would have been quite happy to stop and enjoy the solitude but I'd not run almost 100k to not finish it off so I kept going and reappeared into the bright sunshine of the Stadium.

I was on my own and as soon as I appeared the crowd went crazy. They had seen my fall on their TV monitors. It had been replayed many times. My family winced every time. They had followed my slow painful journey over the last lap and they wanted me to know how much they admired and appreciated my guts in getting to the finish. They had been in the stadium since early morning. They had followed the race from the very start.

They had seen the twists and turns of each lap, supporting their home runners as loud as they could but also cheering on everyone else no matter where they came from. They could see how much effort every single runner was putting in.

Even though all the Ethiopian runners were home no-one left. They wanted to be there to see every runner home. They cheered my every step and my eyes were filling with tears. For those brief moments the pain in my legs, knees, elbow and chest all disappeared and I felt I was running fast and free. I've looked at the video since and I look anything but fast and free so it's surprising what tricks the mind can play.

So I ran to the finish line with my head held high and full of appreciation to the crowd, my family and friends and all the support I have received. I didn't achieve my aim of a medal but I had finished which was the best I could do on the day. That to me equalled success.

Once over the line I just wanted to curl up somewhere and sleep but the officials wanted to keep me moving and the medical people wanted to check me over. As I obediently followed them two men walked towards me. Through my tear filled eyes I recognised them and smiled.

The first to greet me was my grandad. I thought he was back at home, not well enough to travel. It seems he had been determined to come. Against the advice of his doctor, wife and family he was determined that he wanted to be there. I fell into his arms sobbing. I kept saying over and over, 'I'm sorry' but after a long hug he simply looked me in the eye and said, *'I've never, ever been more proud of you as I am at this moment. That took real courage and guts to finish that race. Your time will come and you will win that gold medal but none of that matters. You finished. You showed real character and I love you.'*

We hugged some more and then I saw the other person I recognised, Marc. He was wearing the gold medal. He had won holding off the late surge of Abrihet. Suddenly my own problems melted away and I was full of joy for his success. I knew how hard he had worked for this moment. He deserved in and I was so pleased for him.

Marc, too gave me a hug and wanted to know how I was and how I felt. He took off his gold medal and put it on me. 'Have a good look at it' he said. I did so and renewed my determination to be wearing one of these of my own one day. 'Have a good look' he repeated and so I did. The inscription and weight of it was very special. 'No, have a better look' he said slightly annoyed. 'Turn it over.' As I did so I saw that there was a ring attached to it.

At the same moment Marc went down on one knee and said, 'Will you marry me?' I bust into tears again but this time tears of pure joy. At the moment I said yes the TV camera's caught the exchange and NOW the crowd had something else to cheer.

I walked off arm in arm with my grandad and fiancé. As we strolled off grandad suddenly said, 'I wish I could be alive in 2070.' 'Why' Marc and I asked together. 'I would love to see how fast your child will run the 100k in the Olympics that year!'

THE END