

95 Mile West Highland Way Race 24th June 2006

“It is one of the strange ironies of this strange life that those that work the hardest, who subject themselves to the strictest discipline, who give up certain pleasurable things in order to achieve a goal, are the happiest men. When you see 20 or 30 men line up for a distance race in some meet, don't pity them, don't feel sorry for them. Better envy them instead.” – Brutus Hamilton

“The woods are lovely dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep” – Robert Frost

Most people already know me as a long distance runner, regularly running Marathons for ‘fun’ and taking part in many offbeat races such as Tough Guy and Race the Train, where the emphasis is on enjoying yourself rather than taking yourself too seriously.

Quite a few people began to question my mental faculties however, when I decided to enter into an Ultramarathon in March 2005. Many people have watched Marathons on television and the images that stick with them are of runners who have pushed themselves way out of the comfort zone of normal life, they see runners staggering, collapsing, being helped physically to reach that magic goal that is the finish line of the Marathon. The Marathon is a huge event and well publicised. The Ultramarathon is more underground. Most people never hear of them, even when they are on their doorsteps. A Marathon can have many thousands of participants. The Ultra would consider itself big if it had a hundred, most start with many less. The Marathon distance is 26.2 Miles, and I was going to run 39.3 Miles. Few people could understand why I wanted to do such a thing. Some even questioned whether it was possible at all.

Well, to answer my doubters, despite having a far from perfect run of training for the event due to injury, I got myself patched up for the start line and had a positively life changing experience. The setting was stunning, the Connemara mountain range in Ireland, the weather was good, the other runners on the course were fantastic, and the support towards the Ultrarunners on the course from the other runners and the spectators was amazing. What a great day! I really enjoyed it and finished in a very respectable 8th place. When I crossed the finish line I never wanted to stop running, though I had a really tough race, at the end I still felt strong. This always played on my mind. If I could run nearly 40 miles and still feel good, what exactly was I capable of? I was beginning to catch a glimpse of my true potential. I think we all have massive capabilities but very few people ever even begin to tap into these reserves. I think I was beginning to explore mine and though people were questioning my mental health, I had found a challenge.

At the end of 2005 while surfing running sites on the internet (sorry folks, I may even find this porn thing one day) I stumbled across a site called the West Highland Way Race. Many people have hiked the WHW in Scotland and taken usually 5-7 days to do it. This race sets off from just North of Glasgow and runs non stop all the way to Fort William with a 35 hour time limit. The WHW is 95 miles long and unusually for Scotland, it’s also quite hilly, there is 14760 feet of ascent to contend with as well. Sounds easy so far. Oh yeah, it’s mainly off road, rough mountainous terrain, there is the infamous Scottish weather, and the midges in June would be swarming. I think I had found me a worthy challenge that would push me to my limits, or maybe even beyond them. This was so far from the level I was at that it seemed completely alien. I felt compelled to attempt this just to see if I had what it takes. I didn’t want to go for a ‘safe’ option by just trying to do a 50 mile event. I wanted to enter something that scared me. This was one of the toughest non stop ultra endurance events in the world, it was a very serious and daunting event and it really did scare me, but if I could somehow manage to complete the event I knew it would fill me with an enormous sense of achievement. Though there was a 35 hour time limit, I told everyone that I wanted to try to finish the event in less than 24 hours. I don’t know why, or even if I was capable of this, but the 24 hour mark just seemed like the right target to set for myself.

You don’t just pick up an entry form for these things though. You have to apply. They need to ensure people don’t just enter on a drunken whim. Unlike a Marathon with its regular drink stations and medical aid, the WHW only meets with the aid stations a handful of times over its 95 miles. This is due to the remote and inhospitable terrain making setting up aid stations impractical. But this remote and scenic setting is also what makes these events so memorable.

All entrants taking part have to have a proven running background and hardiness. Between some aid stations you may be on your own for 6 hours or more. Luckily for me (I think?) I was deemed to be made of the right stuff and was accepted.

One of the entry requirements for all runners is to have a motorised back up crew of at least two people, one of which must be capable of running the last two stages with you. This presents a problem. Finding people who think standing round in the middle of nowhere, feeding and watering their runner, watching them slowly being broken down by the distance, while getting eaten alive by midges is not easy. It is very necessary though, as the end of the race has a sting in the tail. Going over a mountain called the Devil's Staircase is always going to be hazardous. Doing it alone while extremely tired at night is lunacy. Even the fittest runners by the time they have run 80 miles may be experiencing some giddiness or disorientation. Some may even become so tired that the trail looks superbly comfy, just for a little nap. When you stop you become a prime target for hypothermia and possible death. I had to find a support crew!

Being a well recognized running nutter at my gym, other nutters usually gravitate towards me. When a few people placed entries for the London Marathon, someone must have suggested they talk to me. This is how I came to meet Gary. Though neither of us got accepted into the London Marathon, a suitable alternative was chosen and I had found a new running buddy. In the build up to the Lochaber Marathon, also coincidentally in Fort William (OK I like Scotland) I would be spending many hours out pounding the roads with Gary, who was always eager to learn and asking many questions as he strived to improve his running, always a tricky situation in case something goes wrong and they blame you in some way, but something went right and Gary agreed to be the driver for the support crew when I attempted the West Highland Way race. As his running improved and he began to get bitten by the running 'bug' he said he could even understand why I would want to push myself further, but he was in the minority.

Being able to find someone who is capable of running the last two sections with you is a much taller order. It would need to be somebody with mountain experience and knowledge of navigation. One of my old running partners was Sarah, a close friend who also happened to be a vet, which may come in useful for patching me up. As well as being a Marathon runner who spent many training runs out with me at a very well matched pace for me, she has also spent time exploring mountains and done fell running, ideal qualities for somebody on the support crew. She has even managed to navigate in the Alps without getting everybody lost. If I could persuade Sarah then I would have the perfect team! Luckily for me she agreed.

I began to get a little concerned when in January Sarah managed to fall off her bike and break her collar bone; she is one of the most accident prone people I know. Would my support runner be helping me to get round the course or would I end up helping Sarah???? I began to picture me carrying her physically off the mountains after some accident. Oh well. I was committed by that point, so just consigned myself to the fact that I would be having a great adventure whatever happened! And Sarah didn't look too heavy to carry off a mountain. I have to say that or she'll hit me.

Training for an Ultramarathon is very similar in many ways to training for a regular Marathon. The main difference comes on the long run. In Marathon training you work your way up to about 20 miles. In training for an Ultra, the long run at the weekend really does become a very long run. My training plan that I had constructed for myself would see me going out and running a minimum Marathon distance about every three weeks. My longest run would be somewhere between 40 – 50 miles. As an added challenge, on the WHW race I would have to do all my own

navigation, so I would need to be comfortable using a map and compass under all conditions. As I can navigate quite well when walking in the mountains I would have to be able to carry these skills over into running. To help with this I bought some maps of areas unknown to me like Sherwood Forest in Nottingham and plotted out routes on these. I planned to run these starting around midnight using a head torch to enable me to see and navigate. If I did this carrying a rucksack full of waterproof clothes, survival gear, food, hydration pack etc. then this would be as close to race conditions as I could hope to simulate without going all the way to Scotland to run on the West Highland Way. Well that was my plan anyway. Whether it would do me any good in race conditions through the mountains in Scotland, time would tell.

During my training I also had a new experience which was very pleasing. I entered into the Belvoir Challenge following recommendations from other running club members about the race. It is billed as a 26 mile off road event. The actual distance was closer to 28 miles by everybody's GPS monitors, and to call it off road is playing down the severity of the terrain slightly. It is an incredibly hard race, quite hilly and very, very muddy.

I nearly didn't even start the race after suffering with a cold for the previous three days, but on the evening before decided that I felt marginally better and would go and see what I could do. It would in any case be an ideal training run for the West Highland Way being an off road long distance event. I set off conservatively and slowly began to feel better as the miles were counted off, and slowly worked my way up from midfield through the runners on the course, trying to hold back a little on the pace as I had been very ill recently. I didn't realise just how well I was really doing until I ran into the second checkpoint at 12 miles and they were not ready for the runners yet. Not only was I the first placed runner but I was running ahead of the last years winners time and caught everyone off guard. To be honest I was a little confused to begin with and wondered whether the lead runners had got lost and we had just got lucky and stumbled in ahead of them somehow. I really didn't believe that I was in physical shape to be challenging the race leaders in a race on a good day, never mind when I turned up in the morning swallowing Ibuprofen tablets to try to make me feel semi-human.

Sensing that I may actually be able to win a race, something I had never achieved before I made a couple of swift decisions. The first 8 runners were all very closely bunched up and every one of them a very capable athlete who could steal the lead away at any time. I knew that to win the race I would have to put on a charge to break away from the pack and hopefully spread them out enough to render their attacks less effective. To win a race, you have to go a little berserk, and I was about to! This would be incredibly hard work though and would take a great deal out of my body. I would no doubt hurt myself in the process and take a while to recover from the exertion. As the following day was also my birthday and winning would be a fantastic present for myself then it was really an easy decision to make.

Coming out of the second checkpoint I began to push the pace. Four other runners kept within striking distance, the others falling off the back of the pack. I tried not to look back and just maintain a relentless pace. By the time I reached the 17 mile checkpoint, the pack had thinned out and it was down to three of us.

After leaving the 17 mile checkpoint the ground conditions deteriorated and became very wet. It was like trying to run in a swamp, all the time your feet getting heavier with accumulating mud. As I am quite a light weight runner and all the long runs I had been doing had built up my leg strength and stamina then I flew across this much better than some of the other runners and the pack broke up even further. By the time I got to the final checkpoint at 22 miles it was me in first again, and last year's winner about 1 minute behind me. I didn't stick around long in the

checkpoint, just enough to record my race number, quick drink and grab a Mars bar and I charged up the road munching my chocolate as I ran. At 24 miles things started to slip away from me slightly though.

In this race they issue you with a map, and mark the turns and direction changes by tying red and white marker tape to stiles, trees and posts so you have an idea which way to go. As it was incredibly windy some of the pieces of tape were very hard to see if they were blowing in a direction away from your vision. I would leap over a stile into the next field and scan around looking for the tape. Sometimes when I couldn't see any I would start to run aimlessly while looking for the tape, most times it worked out but my luck was about to run out. Entering a field and unable to spot any tape, I started running around what looked like a path round the edge of the field to a stile in the far corner. After running right the way across the field and realizing that there was no marker tape I knew I had made a mistake. I stopped and looked back across the field to see the second place runner starting across the field in the other direction. This meant I now had to run right round the perimeter of a wood across the top of a field to get back on track. I charged off at as fast as I could angry at myself for making such an error. I met the other runner at the stile out of the field after my big detour and the lead I had worked so hard for was now lost, and last years race winner was now caught up with me.

I was as determined as ever to get back into the lead though and ran very hard for the next section shaking off the other runner and building up a bigger lead again. Nobody was going to take my birthday present away from me! The ground became really sticky thick mud for the last two miles which was incredibly hard to maintain momentum through on very tired legs. Luckily everybody else's legs were just as tired so I ran into the finish at the village hall as the winner, two minutes ahead of last years winner.

I couldn't stop grinning for days! That really was a great birthday treat and the experience of a lifetime. I did push my body to the limit and suffered with lots of muscle soreness for days afterwards but my grin just wouldn't go away. It was also a good indicator that my training for the WHW was going very well and my running was improving because of the extra mileage I was logging up in my training.

One of the things I would have to do was to try running at night while navigating. For this run I had already planned out a route round the Sherwood Forest area just north of Mansfield on an Ordnance Survey map, and would have to navigate my way round using a map and compass under the light of a head torch. I didn't leave Tamworth till 12:30 am on Sunday morning, and by the time I had found somewhere to park and got myself ready to run it was 2:30 in the morning.

The early stages of the run were simple navigation, following roads to get a few miles on my legs and get comfortable with running and 'settled in' before heading off into the middle of nowhere. I must have looked a little bit of an oddball to say the least. Running down the roads in the middle of the night, fully laden with a rucksack complete with flashing red light on the back and a head torch to see by, map case held in front of me which I kept consulting to check the next turning. At 3 in the morning a car came past and a lad leant out of the window and shouted 'Loser!' I couldn't help but laugh. Being a runner I am accustomed to people shouting at you when you run, the vast majority being harmless things like 'got your number', '118, 118' or 'run Forrest' sort of shouts that often come from the local Chav wildlife. However, on this occasion I found myself agreeing with him in a way. If I had seen somebody doing this sort of thing at this hour myself, I would have come to pretty much the same conclusion. In training for an extreme

sport I had to push aside any such notions if I was to get the required training done, I might be doing things that seemed a bit eccentric but this was very real and very valuable training. A handy hint for the Chav goons in your Vauxhall Corsa's – before you set off, put a lighted sparkler on your roof, you drive the things like dodgem's anyway, so it might as well look like one.

After my encounter with the Chav in his camp girly car, the route thankfully headed away from civilization and into the forests. This is where the navigation became much more difficult. Away from the reassuring glow of the street lights, the whole world closes down to the limits of the beam on your head torch. Navigation that is easy by day when you can see the topography around you and refer back to the map at a glance becomes much more challenging at night when you can see only 20 or 30 metres around you. There were many times when there were no distinguishing features at all around and doubt begins to creep into the decisions you made a few minutes earlier, so rather than head off blindly in some direction, I had to stop and take compass bearings and consult the map much more than usual. When walking and navigating things happen at a gentler pace and you are afforded a little time to keep rechecking your progress. When running, a small error in navigation, a wrong turning could very quickly manifest itself into a huge problem as you are covering the ground much quicker and the longer till you realise you are off course, the further you get from the path and the further you have to backtrack or reroute.

It was really uplifting when the sun began to rise and I could run in daylight again. I had done my run through the witching hours but it was beginning to wear me down after a few hours, all the accumulated complications from the navigation and the tiredness in my legs from running over rough terrain had seen my spirits bottom out. I had simply had enough, I was not expecting the navigating to be so taxing and I had been running for much longer than I had expected. Even though I was very tired when the sun burst over the horizon my spirits began to soar. Physically I was tired but mentally I was much happier so was able to keep on moving.

It was a bit of a wake up call in a way, as I was thinking that the swapping of walking and navigating over to running and navigating would be a fairly simple one. I was still able to navigate the route successfully but at a much reduced pace. The route was nearly 29 miles long and I didn't finish till 8 in the morning. I was going to have to rethink my race schedule. This run had been done under ideal weather conditions, very little wind, mild temperatures, clear skies, no moon but thousands of stars visible, I even switched off the torch and looked up in amazement on a few occasions. All this is weather conditions that Scotland is able to produce very rarely. On the race I would have all the navigational challenges while also getting attacked by the weather; I would no doubt be even slower. Many of the previous entrants into the race jokingly call it the Wet Highland Way. My big hope was that the topography of Scotland would be much more distinguishable than forests and fields so that I wouldn't have to stop and keep checking compass bearings as this was the main thing slowing me down. Time would tell, the event was racing towards me at an unrelenting pace. I was getting scared of looking at the calendar and seeing how little time I had left to prepare.

The deeper I researched into the race and its history, the more I realized what I had gotten myself into. The race began as a challenge between two men in 1985 to race over Scotland's most popular long distance footpath. After 60 miles, neither of them giving an inch, they realised that if neither of them gave up they would destroy each other, so in a great pact of courage and integrity they pooled their resources and ran together. The race at that time was nearer 85 than the current 95 miles and had much less climbing, though it was still an incredible achievement.

The following year the challenge was opened up to other runners, though it was still a small event.

1991 saw the completion of the West Highland Way footpath and the race was now to follow this footpath, which would mean an extra 10 miles, now much more off road and including a lot more climbing. This would mean the runners would be out longer and a significant number would be out for a second night. Since 1991 only 291 people have managed to complete the race. The weather on the course can prove to be a massive challenge in itself. Several times the race has started only to be stopped at a later checkpoint for safety reasons as the weather had deteriorated to such a point that the loss of life would be a very real risk if the race were to continue, as in the 2005 race where although the first 44 runners went through the checkpoint before the Devil's Staircase mountain, the rain then came down that hard that trees were being washed down the mountain and all competitors reaching here were halted at this checkpoint. Those still out on the course had to endure flash floods, hail and lightning storms as they battled their way to the finish line through some absolutely hideous weather.

To reinforce how serious an undertaking this challenge really is and how close it is to the very limits of human endurance, last year 4 people were hospitalised for between 2 and 4 days in intensive care with multiple organ failure. One was only given a 15% chance of survival though he did recover and to date nobody has died on this race. I certainly didn't want to alter those statistics in any way by adding to the numbers, so one of the areas of research was to find out where the other runners difficulties had stemmed from and find ways of trying to avoid them. This mainly stemmed from the high humidity and temperature at the start of last years race, causing all the runners to lose valuable salt through sweating, which if not replaced properly means the body will stop accepting the water you are trying to rehydrate yourself with. I was certainly comforted a little by the fact that Sarah, a very knowledgeable vet was on my support crew and understood the conditions that had affected the other runners, and would be able to keep an eye on me to make sure I wasn't heading down the path to a hospital visit or worse, but it was still a little unsettling to say the least that of the 44 runners that made it through the checkpoint before the race was halted, 4 had ended up hospitalised. I wanted to enter something that scared me, and the challenges of the event alone were doing that, but now there was also a possibility that I would be pushing myself too far and paying the ultimate price for it.

In running such massive distances you deplete the body of its energy stores quite quickly. The human body has a built in running limit of 20 miles, the limit of the body to store glycogen in the muscles and liver, the fuel needed to keep you moving. In human wisdom we have decreed the Marathon distance must be 26.2 miles. In this physical no man's land past 20 miles the Marathon's appeal lies. Everyone who runs a Marathon learns something about themselves and their inner strengths when they 'hit the wall' in the Marathon, the bodies' energy supplies being completely depleted. The Marathon ceases to be a physical event and becomes more a spiritual journey in a way.

I have always maintained to other people that the 20 mile point of a Marathon is more like the half way point than anything else. There may be only 6.2 miles left but they seem to go on for an eternity. By pushing through this barrier, somehow finding the willpower and mental resolve to keep on running even though your body is screaming out for you to stop, you only have to go and stand at the finish line of a Marathon to witness the incredible euphoria that people are overcome with when they finally realise that a goal has been achieved. It is incredibly addictive stuff. And you get cool medals and t-shirts for a lot of events as well, and every time you see these it reminds you just what you managed to do on the journey to the finish line.

What people experience at the finish of a Marathon is amplified and fed back to you in spades when you start messing about in Ultramarathon territory. This territory is fraught with many perils though. Man with his built in 20 mile limit is no more adapted to running massive distances than he is of say, getting to the top of Everest, it's just not something that we are designed to do. That doesn't mean it can't be done, the Marathon finish line bears testament to that, but the further you go, the more walls you hit and have to push beyond and the more challenges you are likely to face that will really test your mettle. I was going to race over twice as far as I had ever done in my life and would be journeying into unknown territory, the mental low points of the race would no doubt be crushingly low, the physical demands of covering the distance truly horrifying, but if I could manage to get beyond all the physical and mental hurdles maybe the rewards for doing so would be something very special indeed. This was certainly my reasoning behind wanting to take part in this race, to push back the barriers or limits of what we think we can achieve. Oh, and look ladies, running gives me a great ass.

I had begun to notice that since my weekly running mileage had increased that my eating habits have changed a bit. There is a tendency to eat anything that has not been superglued to the floor or bolted to a ceiling, and even that wouldn't guarantee complete safety. The light in the fridge was in serious danger of burning out! I was burning that many calories on the weekend long runs that I would find it all but impossible to eat enough food, many people were seriously jealous, though I didn't encounter anybody who wanted to match my long run so they could indulge in the massive calorie intake guilty free. Mmmm....desserts, I'll have three of those please. I'd like to say it was hard work – but I'd clearly be lying.

Things began to get a little strange around the time of my peak mileage training weeks. When people asked what you got up to over the weekend, and I would try to explain how I had gone for a 45 mile run while carrying a rucksack, the mixture of reactions could have been made into its own short film. It certainly gave a humorous element to what I was doing just observing different people's views and questions to me, the general views being split into two camps, that I was absolutely barking mad or some kind of machine, and it got very embarrassing every time I walked into the gym and blokes would start bowing to me with their hands above their heads. At my running clubs presentation night I was awarded the President's trophy for my achievements since joining, and embracing the club spirit (which I think means turning up at the pub after going out on a club run). This also came as a surprise as I only recently joined the club, so was not really expecting anything other than a night out with the club members. I was very happy to receive the trophy though as my plans for running are certainly long term, and though the Peel Road Runners are never going to be in the Olympics, they do have some fantastic athletes and the friendliness and camaraderie amongst everybody is brilliant and has certainly helped my running no end.

It came as something of a relief when I had completed the maximum 45 mile training run with a rucksack I had scheduled for myself three weeks before the event, and effectively all of the distance training was 'in the bank', I could do no more to increase my fitness levels at this stage and could begin to taper down my training. This tapering down of the mileage allows your body to repair itself of all the cumulative damage done to your muscles during the intense training and theoretically you arrive at the start line fully fit and ready to tackle the challenge.

The human mind is never satisfied though and always has an element of doubt. I have never stood on the start line of a race and felt that I could not have done any more training, or there is always some lingering remnants of an injury that has not quite cleared, and sometimes completely new aches and pains manifest themselves from nowhere for no explicable reason. Usually when you begin the race they fade away to nothing and you run freely, but the start line

of the race is usually a nerve wracking anxious horrible worrisome place, and the preceding days can be just as bad, impending doom is never far away on the run up to race day.

The Thursday night before the event was probably the last time I would get the opportunity for a good long sleep. It didn't work, I got about 5 hours at most, and that would have to do me till Sunday. In an event like this you will undoubtedly suffer extreme fatigue so I wasn't too concerned about starting feeling slightly tired.

My support crew would be suffering with sleep deprivation also, and though we were all excited as the start grew closer, there was still a lot of yawning going on when we registered for the race. This was also to be our first experience with the midge, a remarkably small creature that must have a remarkably big mouth considering the size of the bites being taken out of me.

Just before the race begins there is a pre race briefing detailing all the rules and what to do in the event of wanting to retire from the race, then just before 1 am the surreal stuff begins. Just over a hundred runners all decked out with head torches, looking like some band of high speed miners, gather under the underpass leading from the train station at Milngavie into the town centre, and though there are drunks staggering from the pubs, at exactly 1 am we all begin the charge northwards through the shopping mall, past the official start of the West Highland Way and out onto the trails.

It is an enormous relief to be under way. Any nerves fade away and I settle into the running, trying not to think about the distance I have to cover, only focusing on the first checkpoint, 19.6 miles away which must be reached within 5 hours or risk disqualification. The big danger with races is that you usually feel very good during the early miles and it is all too easy to run too fast and burn off all your energy which could knock you out of the later stages of the race. I found myself running at a reasonably quick pace with Kate, the women's course record holder, someone who has done the race many times before and would no doubt be finishing in a time that I was not capable of doing. I did not ease back however as I felt comfortable, and trying to be a little bit crafty hoped to latch onto her as she would know the way and that would save me from having to do any navigation.

When she turned at a junction, me and another runner Carl both followed, all chatting as we ran side by side down the deserted country lanes. After a while Kate says 'I think we've gone wrong, I don't recognise any of this'. Bum. I pull out my map to check and sure enough we turned down the wrong road. The air turns very blue as Kate sounds very cross with herself for making the mistake. She charges back down the road at a ridiculously fast speed, something I did not want to risk, so I let her disappear into the darkness and try not to get upset about it, I won't try to make back the time anywhere, I'm just here to finish. I run all the way back down the lane and rejoin the route, about 25 minutes have been wasted going the wrong way, and a lot of the field of runners is now in front of me. I force myself to relax, at least I now have some new people to talk to while running. My support crew must be a little puzzled, they have seen me at a couple of road crossings sitting in tenth place, and they would be waiting up by Drymen to pass me some food, watching all the runners going past and wondering what has happened to me. I guess 95 miles was not enough, I'll be doing closer to a hundred now, must be more diligent with navigation from now onwards or this could turn into a very long race!

After meeting up at Drymen and explaining what had happened, the next section would see me climb up and over Conic Hill, one of the tougher sections of the race and a bit of a contrast to the easy miles up from the start. The daylight was starting to break through and the views from the top right up Loch Lomond were amazing. Over this hill the midges started to attack in earnest,

and the terrain got much trickier, on the descent from Conic Hill I slipped and fell twice as it was that steep, and it was a relief when the gradient eased back and I entered the car park at Balmaha, checkpoint 1.

I think the early hours of the morning and lack of sleep were affecting the support crew, everybody seemed very slow and sleepy, but I fished the chair out of the car and sat down and Sarah began tending to my feet, I was beginning to feel hot spots on the end of my toes which would soon develop into blisters if not looked after. Sarah cleaned my feet and applied Bodyglide, an anti friction compound then put on fresh socks and got my shoes back on. While this was going on, Collette, Gary's wife was spraying me with insect repellent to try to keep the insects from having their pound of flesh, and Gary passed me food to eat now and some to take with me. Even with my detour I was still half an hour ahead of schedule, and Gary was expressing concern that maybe I was going too fast, something I would pay for later.

The next checkpoint was Rowardennan, seven and a half miles up trails alongside the Loch, Gary joined me running for a section of about two miles, his enthusiasm racing, though he would later confess to finding it a struggle to keep up with me as with about 25 miles on my legs I was still relatively fresh and moving quite swiftly, and as soon as the car came into view when we approached the road he quickly got back in. The Rowardennan checkpoint was the last time I would see my support crew for a long time as the road stops here, and the next time I saw them I would have run all the way alongside the Loch. This checkpoint was much more efficient, everybody was much more awake and fired up, Gary ran down the road from the car park to guide me in, and we trotted up to the car, the chair was already set up and everybody was primed and waiting, as soon as I sat down they all swung into action like a well oiled machine, I was beginning to feel like a pampered athlete, I could not have wanted for anything. Collette was massaging my legs while Sarah looked after my feet, Gary decided that would be a photo opportunity that could not be missed and took a couple of snaps. I had now run about 29 miles and would be starting into the real tricky terrain. Everybody who has been on the WHW generally agrees that the next section is the worst of the entire route, this would be hard work. I bid my farewells and checked out of the checkpoint and set off. I felt a little bit sad to see them go, we were all starting to gel together as a team and now I was on my own.

There is an intermediate checkpoint half way up the Loch set up by the search and rescue teams to break up the distance, this was not somewhere the race crews could get access to so all race entrants were able to leave a drop bag for this checkpoint. My drop bag contained a sandwich and some chocolate, so my next aim was to get here for some food. I was tired from running 30 miles but I still had nearly 70 to cover to get to the finish, a scary thought that I tried to steer clear of, just break it down into small manageable chunks, 7 miles to my sandwich, and then take it from there.

The most notorious section was hard work, clambering over huge rocks, tripping on tree roots sticking up out of the path, all the time going up and down in gradient. The more tired your legs got, the more likely you were to stumble. After getting my sandwich and chocolate the route gets even worse. Another 10 miles of this would see me meet with the support crew at Derrydarroch Farm, but it would be an incredibly long 10 miles. It was good to see the smiling face of Gary who had walked about a mile back from the checkpoint to guide me in. I was exhausted. A lot of other support crews were at the checkpoint all giving massive cheers and enthusiasm towards the runners, I tried to let some of the energy from them boost my spirits, I really was tired. I was not yet at the halfway point, when I sat down in the chair it felt like the most comfortable chair in the world, it was so good just to stop, I may never want to start again.

While my support crew patched me up and tried to get me in some sort of shape whereby I might actually get out of the chair, I took a moment to gaze around. The weather was glorious, maybe slightly too warm for running but I would quite happily take this over some of the stuff Scotland can produce, curious onlookers watched my support crew work and gawped at me like I was from a different planet, most people wore midge nets, something that has yet to hit the boardwalks of Milan, some even had strange full body midge protection and they looked like something from outer space, but that didn't stop people from wanting to watch our team in motion, I couldn't have asked for a better group of friends helping me, we had the best team on the race and maybe the others were learning something, I was made to feel like a star by everybody's cheers but the real stars were my crew, they were the ones deserving the recognition.

After reluctantly getting out of the chair and setting off some very serious gradients began, and while chatting to one of the other runners he said that as well as all of the mountains that are crossed, one often overlooked section is the last one through Nevis Forest, there were some very difficult gradients there as well, so try to have something in reserve for that. I tried not to show that I was already exhausted, where would I find the energy for something 50 miles away, I didn't have a lot available now. My legs were turning to jelly due to the workload.

A couple of miles after I got past the official half way point of the race, a place called Bogle Glen, I was trotting down the trail when I saw Gary coming up the other way in his running gear. Though Sarah was my support runner for the last sections as required in the race rules, Gary was also an enthusiastic runner and wanted to join me where he could. He informed me that they had raced up to the next town and got me a sausage sandwich, and it was at the car about a mile away. We trotted down the trail while I explained to Gary the nightmare section I had just done, trying to keep moving at a reasonable speed so the midges couldn't keep up. As midges are so small as long as you keep moving at more than four miles per hour they can't keep up, so the runners don't suffer too much while they are moving. Slow down or stop and they attack in swarms. I was mainly getting bitten at the checkpoints when I stopped. You can imagine the ordeal the support crews and race officials go through. When I got to the car I ate half the sausage sandwich, and Sarah ate the rest, and me and Gary pushed on towards Tyndrum, one of my scheduled food stops.

Sarah and Collette went ahead, Collette sorting out my food and Sarah setting up the checkpoint stop. When we arrived Sarah once again tended to my feet, this time changing from my trail shoes to road shoes, after climbing out of Tyndrum there are some of the best opportunities for out and out running without being hampered by rough terrain common to much of the WHW. When Collette arrived with my fish and chips, Sarah and I walked up the hill out of Tyndrum while I ate. When I had finished, Sarah took all of the wrappings and headed back down the hill to the car, I was on my own again for a while, Gary had initially wanted to do this section with me but was not confident he would keep up and didn't want to hold me back. With food in my belly I felt a new lease of life in my legs and began to cover some very quick miles, overtaking a few runners along the way, some were seriously suffering, and a few would not make it all the way to the finish line.

The next time I saw the crew was at 'naked man car park'. So called because in April after doing the Lochaber Marathon, we checked out various parts of the route on the way home and when we drove into Bridge of Orchy car park, a chap who had been running was spotted by us in the car park starkers getting changed by his car, so for us this place now had a new name. When I descended the hill to the checkpoint my parents had also turned up to cheer me on which gave

me an added lift. I was now two hours in front of my 24 hour schedule, and felt pretty good. Though my checkpoint stops were much longer and more elaborate than most competitors, my strategy seemed to be paying off, the things I was most concerned with, feet and nutrition were being managed expertly by my superb support crew. I had about 4 miles to go to the last crew accessible place before I started across Rannoch Moor. Britain's highest, most exposed moor and also one of the most beautiful places I would get to see.

At the end of the road the crew were ready and waiting again, Collette massaging legs and my shoulders which were now getting stiff and Sarah once again doing the unenviable job of looking after my feet. After this section Sarah would have to join me as the support runner for going over the mountains. I felt good leaving the checkpoint still buoyed up on the good section of running I had recently done and the time I was in front of my schedule. Everybody left to go to the other side of the moor to the next checkpoint at Kingshouse hotel.

Within a quarter of a mile a wave of complete exhaustion hit me hard, the sun was out, I was trotting uphill, the wind had dropped to nothing and my rucksack felt warm on my back. My eyes closed, I started to fall over and snapped awake again, I tried to push on again, my eyes closed again, there was nothing I could do to keep them open, I was literally falling asleep on my feet. I had asked for some Coke to be de-fizzed so I could take a bottle to drink for across the moor but had forgot to pick it up before leaving the crew. The caffeine would have given me a bit of a boost, I had to do something or I would very soon drop. When exhaustion is beginning to set in then caffeine can give you a marked boost, something I have employed before to good effect, and something I always try to carry on board. I fished around in the waist belt pockets of my rucksack. Bingo. A strip of Pro-plus tablets. I take two and press on, hoping I don't fall asleep on my feet and fall and injure myself before they kick in. Within about 3 mile I am starting to liven up again and can try to enjoy the beauty of the moor.

About a mile from the end, Gary is once again dutifully marching back up the track to meet me off the moor and guide me in to the checkpoint. He is so enthusiastic and upbeat and never fails to lift my spirits. When we get to the checkpoint Sarah looks after my feet and then we prepare to leave. From now till the end Sarah will keep me company. We set off together towards the Devil's Staircase Mountain after putting on waterproof jackets, it is starting to lightly rain and the mountains are cloaked in clouds. We have about 3 miles together, and there will be one last opportunity for Sarah to change any clothing or gear at the car before we disappear into the mountains for many hours. When we approach the support crew and my parents, we are both comfortably running and don't need to change anything, so all they have to do is take photographs and wish us luck.

Over the mountain we move together swiftly, I am pleased to be running with somebody new and despite my initial reservations about Sarah's ability to tackle rough terrain without having a major accident, she is coping very well and moving very fast. We overtake a few runners and I get some envious glances. Not only has Sarah done a sterling job looking after me all day, she has pulled out one of the aces from her hand of cards and shown that she is also a fantastic runner. All that and good looks as well, no wonder I am getting envious looks.

The descent from Devil's Staircase is a leg crunching drag, my legs hurt badly on the steepest sections but we make good progress and arrive at the checkpoint well before we are supposed to be there and ahead of the support crew. We phone them to tell them we are here. The checkpoint is in a health centre, we go in and top up our water carriers and start on one of our food stops, a Pot Noodle, something I thought would be nice in cooler conditions as hot food, but now seems

less appetising, but we eat them anyway as we need the energy for the big climbs ahead. I am now in 15th place and still way ahead of schedule.

After leaving the checkpoint we start a big climb, the road goes on and on, I know the next checkpoint is in a clearing in the forest, after a few miles we can see a long way ahead across the Lairig Moor and all I can see in the distance is mountains, not a solitary tree in sight, never mind a forest. We pass a couple of runners struggling along, we are still going well. When we finally do see a forest it is a huge relief, that was a long path, the Pot Noodle is not sitting well on my stomach and I am getting very tired again. At the checkpoint at Llundavra the midges are out in force, when Sarah sits me on a bench and tends to my feet we both get eaten. We get some Rennies to try and settle our stomachs from the after effects of Pot Noodle and leave as quick as we can before the midges phone all their friends to come round for a runner feast. We have about 7 miles to the finish now. The terrain is much rougher again and as the runner had pointed out to me on the course earlier, the severe gradients have started again.

About a mile after the last checkpoint Sarah's footing went and she fell over. I stop and go back to her as she is picking herself up. She lifts her trouser leg to inspect her injury and quickly pulls it back down hoping I hadn't seen it. I had though. Sarah is seriously hurt; she has a very deep cut on her leg which is bleeding badly. Through tear soaked eyes and a very strained emotional voice she argues with me trying to get me to go on without her. It is an argument that is going nowhere. I am stubborn and despite Sarah's protests I will not leave her. She has looked after me all day and devoted so much time to helping me that I would rather drop out of the race and ensure Sarah gets the help she needs than selfishly push on to what would be a race finish without my crew, which for me would not be a finish worth anything anyway, so my mind is cast.

I ask Sarah if she wants to go back to the previous checkpoint to get help, but she insists on going forwards. We start walking, all the time her leg getting more soaked in blood. She wants me to run on the downhill sections but my legs are all but destroyed. I stop at the top of another leg crunching descent and look down in despair, I put my hand on my thighs and my quads are quivering, my legs are on the brink of giving up altogether. I tell Sarah we are walking it out now; the running is over for me. She thinks I am walking on her behalf but I couldn't run if I wanted to. I was in twelfth place at the last checkpoint, but all of that is unimportant now. When Jody Young comes past us I feel no competitive spirit or animosity towards him, we chat for a little while and when he eases past us I wish him luck and genuinely mean it.

Sarah and I now have a long walk through the forest in dusk. Luckily the midges seem to have abated so someone must be looking down on us and taken pity. The cars of the support crew and my parents will be on the road in Glen Nevis at the foot of Ben Nevis, and as soon as we get there Sarah can get into the car to save herself any further damage. When we finally get close enough to get a phone signal I phone Gary and tell him about Sarah's mishap. An emotional and damaged Sarah finally gets to the refuge of the car and Gary joins me for the final mile and a half to the finish. I feel really bad for Sarah, she has run a Marathon previously, and though she has covered about 22 and a half miles, slightly shorter than a Marathon, the terrain means this is by far the hardest run she has ever done, and it would mean so much to her to finish the last sections she started, as well as meaning so much to me. She must be devastated, because I get upset thinking about it, what a cruel blow so close to the end.

With Sarah safely placed in the car Gary and I set off towards the finish, now I'm back on smooth tarmac I see if my legs have got any running in them. I last about 400 yards before I have to resort to walking again. I say to Gary, I'll walk up to the island at the top of the road and try to

run from there to the finish, about a quarter of a mile. At the island I break into my trot and soon the lights of the leisure centre guide me in to cheers from other runners and support crews. My hospital wrist tag has to be surrendered to signal the end of the race, so I go to reception, stick my arm through the hatch and say 'get me out of this insanity' and they cut off the wrist tag. I've finished. Big hugs all round for the support crew and my parents, my Mom is getting emotional. I am pointed to a room where I can get drinks and food, and some of the other runners of the event are chilling out in reception. My first concern is for Sarah, I get Gary to take her to hospital which is conveniently about half a mile down the road so she can get patched up. I get myself a coffee and biscuits and join the other runners. One runner who I have crossed paths with many times compliments my support runner's running abilities. It is clear to ultra runners who cover a hundred miles in one go that Sarah is a gifted and natural runner, and he is also saddened to hear about her accident and passes on his best wishes. Now I have recomposed myself a little I decide its time to go check on her. At the hospital she gets all of the grit and dirt cleaned from inside her leg and has 6 stitches put in. It still seems so cruel to be robbed of the finish and she was incredibly strong and brave to push on through the pain to get me to the finish. In Sarah I have one amazing friend.

It has been one hell of a journey. The race start and finish seem so far apart that they feel like different events. I have lost all sense of time. I have been running for 22 hours 9 minutes and covered 99.1 miles and finished in 13th place, nearly 2 hours ahead of my 24 hour schedule. Out of 102 starters, 70 people finished; a fact that can only have been helped by the almost perfect running conditions. Conditions were so favourable that the race winner broke the course record by nearly 45 minutes, finishing in an astonishing 15hours 45minutes. The figures are astounding enough, but the journey, not the destination is at the core of my experience. My support crew has been amazing and though I get the glory and recognition for finishing, the real glory should be placed on the support crews and race organisers. They do most of the work for very little recognition and make the event what it is.

After getting back to the hotel I get showered and climb into bed and slept a deep satisfied sleep. The goal I had been driving towards for so long was in the bag, what a great day it had been. On waking the next day and going for breakfast, I seemed to be the one who was moving most fluidly of anybody who ran. Sarah was dosed up on painkillers and could barely bend her leg, Gary had twisted his ankle on one of the trail sections he ran with me and that was swollen and he was limping about, Collette was suffering with a cold from when we set off from Tamworth and did not moan once and selflessly cared for me without fuss, and though I was suffering with a lot of muscle soreness I certainly didn't look like I'd done nearly a hundred miles yesterday. During breakfast Gary pointed out that there were still people out on the course. Though I did a fantastic time and managed to finish just as daylight was making its last gasps, running for two nights is an altogether different proposition. Being on your feet for that long alone is mind boggling, and doing some of the latter stages in the mountains and forests would be much trickier at night. Anyone who can cover this distance gets massive respect, but those who do it over a much longer timescale deserve even bigger recognition in a way than the glory boys at the front.

Today was the presentation, where we went to collect our crystal goblets. The winner Jez Bragg collected a giant gold tray and special mentions went out to a runner who had just completed his tenth WHW so collected a decanter. The things people will do to get a set of glasses. The crystal goblet is engraved with the West Highland Way Thistle symbol and the route is marked out on it, and you wouldn't get many glasses out of a bottle of wine, quite sizable. The organiser Dario also told tales of some of the events of the race, including Kate's getting lost, not the first time

I've been led astray by a woman, but it didn't do her too much harm, she still finished first woman, fourth place overall in 18 and a half hours.

One person who did suffer more was Mark Hamilton, who turned his ankle 5 miles into the race and heard a loud crack. The ankle started to swell badly until checkpoint 3, Derrydarroch farm, 44 miles in, where the swelling started to subside. When he got to the race doctor at 71 miles he was told it warranted an x-ray. Mark went on to finish the race and on the evening after the presentation went and got that much warranted x-ray to find he had fractured his tibia. He had run the last 90 miles on a broken leg!

I was very lucky to come through this unscathed, there were a couple of times I did go over coming down the very steep conic hill and many close calls where I did not pick up my heavy legs enough and caught them on rocks or tree roots and nearly came a cropper. My support crew was a little less fortunate, and my heart really felt for Sarah who was injured so close to the end, but everyone still maintained they had a great time.

I told everybody after I crossed the finish line that I would never do this again. In the forest on the last section with Sarah as night was closing around us I told her if I ever mentioned doing this event, to remind me just how punishing and despairing the last section really was. But as I sit here typing this only two days later and I think of the magnificent achievement and a warm glow washes through me, I can already see where improvements could be made. People ask how I'm going to top this, and the answer is I don't think you can. Each event is different and each comes with its own unique challenges and for me the event, the scenery, the other runners, the other support crews all cheering you on, and my own fantastic support crew all culminated to create a stunning day. If I were to go and do another event, even if it were longer or more challenging then all the parameters would be shifted and I doubt you would top the West Highland Way for the overall atmosphere. Will I do it again – probably some day, but maybe not next year, I'm really not decided yet, it is such a massive undertaking which took an enormous amount of preparation both physically, mentally and logistically.

For now I'm quite content to sit down and ponder over which bottle of wine to open to test drive my new goblet. And then I will propose a toast to my great friends Sarah, Gary and Collette, you were the skilled engineers who kept my engine running and you occupy a special place in my heart – cheers!