

West Highland Way Race

Race Tale by John Kynaston

Saturday 20 June 2009

This was my third running of the whw race and I was looking forward to it as much as the first. Last year I exceeded all my expectations and ran 27secs under 20hrs. When I finished I thought I'd never better that as everything had gone so well. But over the last year I trained just as hard and felt as fit so I was interested to see whether I could repeat it. In my 'Guess my Time' competition a number of my running friends predicted around 20hrs 30mins based on the fact that it was such a good run last year and it is hard to repeat it. I fully understand that reasoning and I might well have predicted a similar time if I was them. There were others, particularly Marco, who had also run with me over our training runs who felt that another sub 20hrs was possible.

So I set out determined to see if I could run as well as last year. I wasn't going to be disappointed if I didn't manage it but I was going to give it my best effort.

Friday 19 June - the day before the race

It had been a busy week at work and I was looking forward to having the whole of Friday to prepare and rest. I spent the morning sorting out my gear and food, watching the race dvd and my video diary and reading my report from last year. After lunch I went back to bed for 3hrs. I didn't sleep soundly but I dozed off and felt rested when I got up at 4.30pm.

The evening dragged on a bit but after a lovely pasta meal we were ready for the off at 10.50pm. Katrina, Jo & Jono, Emma and Hollie were coming with me to support me through the night. Laura & Josh were going to meet them at Auchtertyre in the morning. Donald & Stevie, two good friends from Kilarchan AAC, would be taking over support duties at Auchtertyre.

Milngavie - 11.20pm



With Neal before the start

We arrived at Milngavie Train Station about 11.20pm and found one of few remaining parking places. I wandered over to the church hall to register, be weighed, give some blood and a urine sample and meet friends. The BBC were filming the race this year for 'The Adventure Show' so we given numbers to identify us but to be honest they would only last as long as my top change.

The first year I did the race I wasted a lot of nervous energy talking to people and staying on my feet. Last year and this year I made an effort to find somewhere to sit and rest for the last hour before the race. At 12.15am I was comfortably sat down waiting for the race briefing when we were told it was being held outside. Sometimes even the best plans don't work out!!

By the time I got there Dario was just about to start so I sat down on *the grass behind him and listened from there!*

Milngavie to Drymen

In the 5-10mins before the race started I tried to say hi to as many friends as possible and then we were off. Next stop Fort William, 95miles away. For me one of the key things is to try and focus on each leg at a time so my first thought was to treat the 12miles to Drymen as an easy warm up. I wanted to find my own little space and run well within myself.

As we ran through the High Street a group of young people were coming out of the pub and decided it would be fun to stand in the middle of the path and wave at us. I don't think anyone was hurt or stopped but not the wisest thing to do.

Very quickly I did find my rhythm and was quite happy running behind a whole crowd of people. One incident did amuse me. I was running behind a guy who was carrying a full rucksack plus a full bum bag. It was bouncing away on his back and hips. As I thinking why carry so much he dropped a bag of crisps and had to stop and pick them up.

I was running just behind Sharon and Ian Rae and could see Marco not too far ahead. Neal, as predicted, was away near the front.

After 25mins or so I realised I should have made one more visit to the loo before I started as I needed a pee. I waited a bit longer but decided I'd be better stopping. I tried to pee on the move and was partially successful as when I started up again Ian & Phil had caught up and Phil commented on the line of wee along the ground!!

I then ran with Aileen Scott for a while and we chatted about our goals for the race. She looked as though she had started well and I'm sure would have a strong run. At the 4mile mark I saw Chris McGlennon for the first time. Chris is a member of Kilbarchan AAC and ran the Fling this year. He had decided to bring his car and bike and cycle out to various points to cheer us on. Thanks Chris.

I met Team Kynaston about a mile or so after Beech Tree. Just a quick stop for water and some food to eat before Balmaha. After my successful 2 day training run I was determined to start eating small amounts throughout the day. So I'd already eaten a few jaffa cakes and was looking forward to a Cadbury's eleven's bar at 2.30am!!

This year I had decided to break down each main section in a 3-4 sub sections of between 2-4miles. Now I know that some runners would hate this but it works for me. Having run on the route so often now in races and training runs I'm able to work out where I need to be. I also set my Garmin watch to show average pace for that split.

So for example I was aiming for a pace of 10.15 mins per mile for the 2.44 miles from Gartness to Drymen. I could glance at my watch and get my average pace and make sure I was within range. It was to prove really helpful throughout the race. It also meant that basically I just concentrated on the next 3-4miles and let the overall distance take care of itself.

I caught up with Ian Rae just before Drymen and we ran in together. Ian was running his 6th whw race and has lots of good stories. He was telling me in his first race he got to Braveheart Car park in 33hrs and decided to have a sit down before tackling the final mile. He and his support runner both fell asleep and almost missed the final cut off of 35hrs!

As I arrived at Drymen I glanced at my watch and saw that it had taken me 1hr 57mins 28secs. I had my splits from last year with me and saw that last year I arrived here in 1hr 57mins 15secs! This was to be something that was to be repeated throughout the day.

Team Kynaston had travelled on to Balmaha to wait for me there so I went straight through Drymen and headed towards Conic Hill.

Summary – 12.19miles in 1hr 57mins 28secs

Drymen to Balmaha

Within the next mile or so I caught up with Sharon and another female runner. Sharon & I then ran to Conic Hill together. I had anticipated that I'd be running with Sharon for a good part of the day as we seem to run at a very similar pace. In the end I didn't see much of her until the end but that's to come!

We chatted and ran and were soon at the bottom of Conic Hill. By now it was light and the head torches were off. It is a strange sensation running in the dark as you just focus on the yard of ground in front of you. I pushed on up the hill and caught a few people but once we were over the top and heading down into Balmaha they all went past me again.

I am always cautious going down Conic Hill. Firstly I don't want to fall which is easy to do but also I want to save my quads for later. It is easy to push the downhill off Conic but struggle many hours down the road. Anyway that's my excuse for being the slowest down the hill!

With each year of running this race I am becoming more confident with my pacing and willing to let others go and make sure I don't get caught up with trying to run at someone else's pace.

Team Kynaston were waiting for me at Balmaha. A quick 1mins 43sec stop to refuel and I was away again. They told me that Neal was 4th and running well. My reaction, 'What an idiot! He'll pay for that later' Was I right? We'd see.

The car park was full and if anyone happened to just arrive at 4.30am they would be wondering what is going on!

Summary: 6.87miles in 1hr 19min 13secs (plus 1min 43sec stop)

Overall 19.06miles in 3hrs 16mins 41secs

Balmaha to Rowardennan

We had decided this year to use Sallochay as a stop rather than Rowardennan. Katrina found parking the van and turning round at Rowardennan a pain so was very happy when I suggested using Sallochay instead. As it's 3 miles nearer I only had an 45mins or so of running before my first proper stop.



I ran the section on my own. I did see Chris a couple of times but no-one else. Last year I'd had a tough time on this section but today I just got on with it and kept going.

Team Kynaston were waiting at Sallochay. I changed top and had some food and drink. They were being attacked by the midges but had me sorted out and ready to go inside 5mins. I glanced at my legs and saw they were covered in midge bites. I wasn't aware of them as

I ran so was happy to get going as soon as possible. As we couldn't have support at Beinglas farm I decided to carry an empty rucksack to Inversnaid where I had a drop bag with enough food for that stop and for Beinglas.

Just as I got going again I was joined by Gavin McKinlay and Billy Minto. Gavin had overtaken me with 2miles to go in the race last year and I remind of the fact every time I see him. I was hoping to get the better of him this year! I'd not met Billy before but we read each others blogs and communicated through posts.

So it was great to run the 30mins or so into Rowardennan together. Gavin didn't think he would be as strong last year but I was fully expecting to see him again. Billy had run the Fling in 9hrs 23mins and I knew that he would be going well.

Gavin and Billy were both stopping at Rowardennan whereas I was running straight through. In the end I didn't Gavin again until the prize giving on Sunday but Billy was a different story.

Summary: 7.84miles in 1hr 28mins 21secs (plus 4min 50sec stop at Salloch)
Overall 26.90 miles in 4hrs 46mins 45secs

Rowardennan to Inversnaid

It felt slightly strange not stopping at Rowardennan but in some ways it was good as often it takes me a good few minutes to get going after stopping there. Again I was on my own and concentrating on the next 4.5miles to the single track. I had allocated 47mins which worked out at 10.40pace. There is a long climb out and then a steep hill down so I knew the average pace would be higher than that for the uphill and would come down on the downhill. Well that was the theory!

I was feeling good and walked where I had to and ran easy when possible. I did a short video clip at some point along this bit. Last year I did video clips along the whole route but this year I only did a couple as I was really concentrating on my pace and effort.

I reached the single track a minute early and reckoned that I was now about 7mins ahead of my 2008 pace. I had decided to work on a sub 21 schedule until Auchtertyre and then decide whether sub 20 was on or not. At this point I was confident I'd be going for sub 20.

My confidence might have been misplaced as I started to struggle a bit on the run in to Inversnaid. As is often the case when you're finding things hard someone catches you. This time it was guy called Tommy Hepburn who was running very strongly. I let him pass and then decided to try and stay with him. We chatted and he really helped me through my sticky patch. Tommy had finished in 20hrs 56mins or so last year and seemed to be on his way to better that.

Just before the Hotel we caught up with a group of three runners so I can't have been that slow after all! In fact I was just 5secs slower than time for this section last year. Tommy went straight on and I stopped for something to eat and put some food in my rucksack for Beinglas.

Summary: 7.27miles in 1hr 19mins 15secs (plus 2min 49sec stop)
Overall 34.17miles in 6hrs 10mins 50secs

Inversnaid to Beinglas Farm

The three guys also stopped to refuel so once again I was on my own. I settled down to run the next section as solid as possible. I had 3 sections of 2.57, 2.00 and 2.09 miles before Beinglas so I just tried to think about getting to the next one on time.

It was around this time that I received the first of a number of texts from Jay. They always had something encouraging to read and something to think about. Thanks Jay – they were really appreciated.

Over the next 45mins or so all 3 of the guys I'd seen at Inversnaid went past me. I tried to stay with them but they were just quicker over the terrain than I was. But again I wasn't concerned as I was bang on my pace schedule and didn't need to push any harder than I was.

It did concern me though if people were passing me so when we got on to the open field before Dune Bothy and I saw them I felt better. On the uphill climb at the top of the Loch I counted 4 runners and the 4th one looked like Thomas. I was really surprised as the last I'd heard at Salloch Thomas was running okay with Marco. But it definitely was Thomas. As I went past Thomas he said he was finding it hard but we didn't chat much. I caught the other guys as well and arrived at Beinglas in 1hr 27mins which must be my quickest in any whw or Fling race.

Dario had left a number of containers of water so I stopped for 3mins to replenish water and eat and drink. Thomas and the other guys went past me again while I stopped.

Summary: 6.61miles in 1hr 27mins 56secs (plus 3min 01secs stop)
Overall 40.78miles in 7hrs 41mins 35secs

Beinglas Farm to Auchtertyre

I knew Team Kynaston would be waiting at Carmyle Cottage which was just over 4miles away. I thought it would take under an hour so I set off after Thomas and the other guys. I caught up with Thomas on hill so I walked and talked. I assumed it was his calf but he said, 'no, it's everything. Quads, Hamstrings, everything.' He was struggling to run and as I carried on I was really concerned for him as he still had 55miles to go. Sadly he had to stop at Kingshouse after bravely battling on for 72miles. He will be back. I would to be his coach and training planner!! He has so much talent but has not made the best decisions this year. It's difficult because what I see from the outside is maybe not the whole picture and I know Thomas plans and prepares well.

I went through Derrydaroch and arrived at Carmyle Cottage in 50mins. It was great to see Team Kynaston. Murdo McEwan was looking after the base and it seemed a great meeting point. Murdo told me I was in 18th position which I was happy about.

Katrina said that Neal had been through before they arrived and that Sharon and Marco were about 5mins ahead. It was raining by now but it was never really cold. In fact I felt it was excellent conditions for running all day. Not so great for the support teams though.

After a short break I was off again and heading up the hill towards Auchtertyre. I ran, walked, ate and kept going. Just after the 'nasty' farmer farm Billy caught up with me. He looked strong and was ran a bit together. Billy makes and runs in his own shoes so it was fun to see them in action. They looked good!



After the big gate he pushed on and I concentrated on the next 3.62miles to Auchtertyre. I had decided that if I arrived at Auchtertyre around 9hrs 48mins I would use my sub 20 cards. If I was nearer 10hrs 18mins I would stick with the sub 21. I had 44mins to get there.

On the final hill before the A82 road crossing I saw a runner ahead so that gave me something else to think about rather than my pace. As I caught him I was surprised to see that it was Billy. I assumed he was away. He said that his quads were starting to hurt a bit. I know what that feels like and wondered how he would get on over the second half of the race.

We ran down the hill together and then I pushed on to the check-point. I arrived at Auchtertyre in 9hrs 47mins 42secs which was 38sec faster than last year!!! If I didn't realise it before I knew now that this run was going to be as close as last year.

I was weighed. I'd lost 2kg. Donald & Stevie and Laura & Josh were there so they all got me fed and watered and I was off again. I changed Garmins. Thanks to Jim Ogilvie for lending yours. They only have a 12hr battery so I needed 2.

Summary: 9.55miles in 2hrs 03mins 06secs (plus 5min 34sec stop)
Overall 50.33miles in 9hrs 47mins 42secs

Auchtertyre to Bridge of Orchy

Billy was right with me and we ran to Tyndrum together. He commented that he felt I was running very strongly which was encouraging. I felt okay but knew it was still a long, long way to go.

I had allocated 37mins to Tyndrum and so was surprised when I got there in 30mins. Billy's support were waiting for him and he stopped for a break whereas I carried on. So I was back on my own and walked up the hill out of Tyndrum.

I had 2 sections of 3.32miles to run and I was aiming for 11mins a mile pace. I caught Jody Young about half way along and ran solidly all the way. I was caught in a heavy shower at this point and for the only time felt quite cold in my short sleeved top. It didn't last too long and by the time I arrived at Bridge of Orchy I'd warmed up.

Team Kynaston were waiting by the Train Station so I gave them a wave. I think the rest of the team were sleeping!

Donald and Stevie were waiting at the check point. A 4min 30sec stop – just enough time for some food and drink and off again to Kingshouse. Donald told me that Sharon had run through full of smiles and running strongly. No change there then. But that Marco was struggling and didn't look too good.

I wondered whether I was like Marco or Sharon??

Summary: 9.27miles in 1hr 43mins 17secs (plus 4mins 30sec stop)
Overall 59.60miles in 11hrs 36mins 33secs

Bridge of Orchy to Kingshouse

There is a long climb out of Bridge of Orchy and I worked hard at keeping a good pace going all the way up. After about 20mins Billy caught me up and we ran towards Inveroran together. On the way down I opened a bit of a gap and once again I was concerned for him and his quads. It's the downhills that are the worse and he mentioned that he wasn't looking forward to the descent into Kinlochleven and Fort William.

At Inveroran I saw Caroline, Peter and Harvey and wondered whether Neal was coming back but no, I think they waited to see me? I could see Marco not far ahead and felt I would catch up with him at some point. I stopped for a minute with Donald and Stevie and then set off for the Rannoch Moor.

Billy continued on looking a lot better on the up hills and was soon away in the distance. Billy's two support team were a good laugh. They chalked a number of messages on the road like 'We love you Billy.' It was like being on the Tour de France. They also primed a group of 6 ladies out for a walk to shout 'Go, Billy, Go' when they saw him. He was just passing me at this point and I asked, 'what about me?'

I was bang on time to my first mark and so set off up the hill to my next one confident of making it to Kingshouse in the 2hrs 30mins I wanted. I started to think ahead a bit and wondered whether I would make the sub 20. It was first time I'd really spent time thinking about it and decided to stop my day dreaming and concentrate on my next mark. Look after the next bit and the overall time would take care of itself.



I could see Billy and Marco in the distance but couldn't really tell whether I was catching or not. After my second mark at 4.25miles I did catch Marco as we walked up the long hill with 4.5miles to Kingshouse. We walked up the hill together. Marco basically said that he'd run out of energy. His pacing had been spot on and he's been running steadily but by the time he arrived at Bridge of Orchy he was struggling to run. He was hoping that he'd be able to get going again soon.

Once we hit the top of the hill I started running but Marco continued to walk. He wished me all the best for the rest of the race but I fully expected to see him again. I ran strongly down into Kingshouse and passed Debbie who was running up to see Marco.

I arrived at Kingshouse in 2hrs 30mins 59secs. Donald & Stevie had everything ready and I sat down and ate a yogurt and drank some milk. By now I was struggling to eat anything that involved chewing too much but a thick and creamy yogurt was good. As I ate I was interviewed by the BBC. I can't remember what I said but I'm sure it was to do with I need to keep going to break 20hrs!

**Summary: 11.98miles in 2hrs 30mins 51secs (plus 5min 35sec stop)
Overall 71.58miles in 14hrs 11mins 54secs**

Kingshouse to Kinlochleven

I had arranged to see Donald & Stevie at Altnafeadh so just took what I needed for the next 40mins or so. Team Kynaston were parked down the back road and gave me a wave on the way by. They also told me that Neal was now 45mins ahead (it was more like 55mins I think). I realised then that he was not coming back and was having the run of his life!! I decided I had another few hours as Kilbarchan whw record holder!!

I would say that the next hour or so was my hardest of the whole race. I'd run hard into Kingshouse and was feeling the effects. There is also a lot of uneven ground and I never find it easy to run when it's like that. So all in all it took me 4-5mins more than I'd planned. Now that might not seem very much but that's over 3miles. If you add 4mins to every 3miles from there to the end it adds up!

In my planning with Donald & Stevie we knew that I wouldn't be allowed a support runner this year as I hoped to be within 4hrs of the leader. So we had arranged that Stevie would run the Devil's staircase and wait for me at the top with some food. Then once he'd seen me he would run on into Kinlochleven. Then Donald would do the same on the hill after Kinlochleven.



I climbed the hill as best as I could but I was conscious of 2 guys gaining on me. They caught me just after the top and ran very strongly down the hill. I, on the other hand, was struggling. I was another 6mins slower than my schedule and started to doubt whether the sub 20hrs was on. For the only time in the race I reasoned that it didn't matter. I have a sub 20hrs to my name and a good number of people were expecting me to over 20hrs anyway.

I then had a very strong word with myself! I did want to break 20hrs again. I could do it. I'd spent the last 6months training hard for this and I wasn't going to give up without a fight. I reasoned that I still had 40mins to run the remaining 3.43miles to Kinlochleven to arrive in a similar time to last year. So just get on and do it.

From this point I thought about a text I'd received from Ross Toole the day before the race. Ross is a very good runner at Kilbarchan. He sent a text saying how much he enjoys reading my blog, thinks I might be a bit obsessive (?) but said just remember it's a case of putting one foot in front of the other again and again and again. So that's what I did. I decided that if I could just keep going I'd give myself a chance.

Just before I arrived at Kinlochleven the BBC were on the small bridge ready to film. As I came onto the bridge the presenter said something like, 'Most people take 5 days to walk the whw but these runners do it in under 1 day' as I ran past. So I hope they use that bit in the programme!!

I was 4mins slower than last year from Kingshouse to Kinlochleven but I was still 3mins faster overall. So once again it was going down the wire. I was weighed again. I think I lost another kg or so.

Murdo was there and told me to slow down so he could win my competition (he guessed 20hrs 33mins 41secs) but that was one piece of advice I wasn't listening to. He also told me that Scott Bradley was finished having won the race in 16hrs 11mins. An amazing run.

**Summary: 9.08miles in 2hrs 17mins 09secs (plus 6min 16secs stop)
Overall 80.66miles in 16hrs 34mins 38secs**

Kinlochleven to Lundavra

So I left Kinlochleven with 3hrs 20mins to break 20 hrs. At least this year I knew that I had 1hr 50mins to Lundavra and then 1hr 30mins to Fort William. I felt stronger than last year and felt I had a 80/20 chance of making it.



I climbed up the hill as hard as I could and started to prepare myself for the Lairig Mor. Donald was waiting for me with some food and drink and to take some photos. The BBC were also there and the guy said can you stop for a couple of minutes for an interview. I said, 'I'm really sorry but this is going to be so tight to break 20hrs I can't stop!'

He wished me all the best and I carried on. When Donald went past me I asked him to ring Hollie with my time at Kinlochleven. Hollie had been updating my blog throughout the day. I'd had a few tests saying that people were following my progress which was fun to know. In fact when I got home I checked the hit counter and discovered that over 250 people (with over 600 hits) had been on

during the day. So thanks for all who came and followed the race. John McLaughlin rang on Monday to say that he was quite tense waiting for the final update from Fort William!

Last year I found it quite hard to run on some of the rocky terrain but this year I felt stronger and ran more. After 20mins or so I caught up with Billy. He was walking and limping and said his quads were really sore now and that he was going to have to walk the rest of the way, which he did and finished in 21hrs

I was bang on target at my first mark and then knew I had another 3.48miles to the sheep pen which was then 1.10 miles to Lundavra. This really helped me as this section can be quite featureless. It all looks the same and there are 3 false horizons. So I just settled into running the next mile, then the next one and then the last one and a bit.

Before I knew it I was at the sheep pen and had caught up with another runner who turned out to be Stephen Bell. I went past him and pushed into Lundavra arriving in 1hr 47mins 20secs which was 6mins faster than last year.

I didn't stop, just gave in my number, drank some milk and was off on the final leg.

Summary: 7.50miles in 1hrs 47mins 20secs (no stop)

Overall 88.16miles in 18hrs 28mins 14secs

Lundavra to Fort William

So I now had 6mins more at this stage than last year and was feeling more and more confident that I would be able to break the 20hrs. Even when Steven went past me I wasn't worried as I was saving myself for that final hill.

I wanted to get to the top of the hill by the big stile with at least 37mins to go. I was a little slower than I'd hoped but still got there with 39mins to break 20hrs. I felt it was going to be close but I should do it. I decided I wasn't going to stop but keep running the whole way. Last year I stopped to walk a small uphill section and found it hard to get going again. I wasn't making that mistake again.

It also helped that I saw Steven and that he wasn't very far ahead. So I made him my target. He walked up the small hill so that made me even more determined to run it. Last year Gavin overtook me at about the same point that I got past Steven so I know how it feels!

By now I was really flying at around 8mins a mile pace and knew that I'd be well inside 20hrs. I had none of the mental struggles of last year wondering how close I would be. This year I was enjoying the last couple of miles. Then it got even better!!

I saw a very familiar runner ahead. I took a couple of looks but it definitely Sharon. I hadn't even considered catching her as she'd been 5-10mins ahead every since Balmaha. But there she was and I caught up with her quite quickly. I knew she was about to win the Ladies prize so losing out to me wouldn't be so bad. Also it would give her more incentive to come back next year to beat me!!

I pushed on and arrived at the Braveheart Car Park in 22mins 24secs (2mins 36secs quicker than planned). Team Kynaston were waiting in their cars to cheer me on. I think I caught them by surprise so that was encouraging as well.



Last year I didn't record my pace for the last mile so decided to use the car park to the leisure centre as my last leg. I had given myself 12mins at 10.43 pace to do it. I was feeling really good, relaxed in the knowledge that sub 20 was in the bag so pushed as hard as I could. My Garmin was showing 7.47 for the last mile and it felt soooo good.

I passed the 30 sign, the official whw end and then ran into the Leisure Centre. Team Kynaston were all there plus quite a few others, cheering me on. Dario was at the door to greet me as well.

So I did it! Another pb – three years in a row. Can I get another pb next year? I really don't know but one thing I can promise – is that I'll be trying my very best.

Summary: 6.92miles in 1hrs 23mins 45sec
Overall 95.08miles in 19hrs 51mins 59secs

Once a massive thank you to all those who supported me both on the day and in the months leading up to the race.



A special thank you to Team Kynaston (Katrina, Jo & Jono, Emma, Laura & Josh, Hollie, Stevie and Donald).

You were all superb and I hope you enjoyed your day as much as me!