

West Highland Way Race 2022

How on earth did I end up here?

I dabbled in running a few years ago, getting as far as running the Loch Ness Marathon in 2012. I finished physically and emotionally empty in 4 hours 23 minutes. Not a very fast time but I'd done it. Then I got fed up with road running and stopped.

In 2013 Dale asked if I wanted to take part in a mountain marathon with him, and that was the start of us doing at least one per year until Covid arrived. They are hard but oh so enjoyable, and they give me a sense of achievement that road running never did.

But things really changed in 2017 when an advert popped up in my Facebook feed for a 5k social trail run at Mugdock Park. I went along, absolutely loved it, and basically that was me hooked. The 5k runs grew into 10k runs, and Jo, who led the runs, was a font of knowledge in all things trail running, and the routes she created were awesome. Talking to her and other people who went along introduced me to ultramarathons.

My first one was the 50km John Muir Way Ultra in 2018. Just like Loch Ness, I was physically and emotionally wrecked at the end, and realised that I wasn't cut out for ultras.

So I ran it again in 2019 😊, but this time I'd prepared much better and finished feeling great ... which was just as well because the following month I ran the Highland Fling. At 53 miles it was a big step up for me, and although I was physically and emotionally tired at the end, I had absolutely loved it.

When races restarted in 2021, I ran 4 ultras, the longest one being the St Cuthbert's Way at 65 miles. Again, I was exhausted at the end and indeed the last 10 miles or so were really tough, both physically and once again mentally. I said to a fellow runner that I'd love to do a 100 mile race, but I now realised that it was out of the question. There was no way I could run 30-odd miles more than what I was doing there. The additional physical and mental strength that it would take were beyond me.

But if you don't stretch yourself you don't improve, and so at the end of the year I found myself entering the ballot for the 2022 West Highland Way Race. And then, gulp, I was offered a place.

Here we go

My sister Lyn was crewing for me, and we checked into our Airbnb in Balloch on Friday afternoon, with me heading straight to bed to try to get some sleep. I nearly nodded off, but I was just too excited at what lay ahead and so I finally got up about 6pm for dinner. I'd been doing some serious carb loading since Tuesday, and was by now sick of the sight of pasta. I'd had it for dinner on Tuesday, and for lunch and dinner on Wednesday and Thursday. I figured that the only way I'd eat it again now was for it to be accompanied by a salt and

vinegar-laden portion of chips from the chippy. So Lyn did her first crew member task of the weekend and went out to get some. 15 minutes later I was starting on my pasta, chips and a couple of bonus fritters. It went down a treat. I then headed to bed for another attempt at a sleep. But I finally gave up and we decided to head to Milngavie.

We parked the car in the small car park along from the church where registration was set up and headed inside. I got registered and collected the T-shirt I'd pre-ordered, and then the goody bag which contained a nice hoodie and buff. As we were heading outside we bumped into Michael. Lyn was at school with Michael, and as he's her dentist they knew they were both crewing and would probably see each other. We had a quick chat and then took the obligatory photos at the posters. After dropping the goody bag and T-shirt off at the car we took my drop bags to the station car park to hand them over. Mine seemed a lot bigger and heavier than everyone else's, probably due to the fact that each one contained a 2 litre bottle of water pre-mixed with Tailwind. I sweat a lot so didn't want to take any chances in not having enough fluids!

As there was some time to kill until the 1am start we walked along the main street to the start of the West Highland Way, taking some photos when we got there. There was a lively pub just across from the obelisk, and given what lay ahead I couldn't help but think that the people in there having a normal, loud, drunken Friday night were so shallow 😊. Anyway, we headed back to the car for a soft seat until it was time to start.

The station was buzzing with nervous energy when we arrived. I had a look around for some people I know who were also running, but couldn't see any of them.

Since we'd arrived in Milngavie I'd been wondering whether to start the race with my jacket on or not. There was no rain forecast for the early stages, but it was feeling quite cool and the jacket would help keep me warm. But it would also make me sweat. Two weeks before race day I'd done a 20 mile run starting at 1am to see how I'd get on with eating at that ungodly hour. The eating had gone well, but I'd learned some other valuable lessons, one of which is how cold it is at that time of the night, even in summer. I had definitely needed my jacket that night. But this evening wasn't as cold and so after a lot of humming and hawing I decided to leave the jacket off, hoping that my long-sleeved base layer and T-shirt on top would be warm enough.

At 12:45am Ian Beattie and Sean Stone gave us the welcome and medical briefings, along with a touching minute's silence for running friends who we've lost since the last WHW Race. When it was finished Lyn headed off to the main street and I began to get "in the zone" for running. Agnieszka appeared next to me and it was really great to see someone I knew and to have a blether! Then all of a sudden the starting horn sounded which completely took me aback. We'd been so busy talking that my watch wasn't primed, and so a frantic few button presses and "get a GPS lock!!!!" prayers later, I got it started just as I entered the tunnel. After months of training, preparation and planning, I was off! I could hardly believe I was now running in this iconic race.

There was a fantastic crowd lined along the main street, cheering us on as we ran towards the official start of the Way. I gave Lyn a wave, and a moment later I was turning off the street, down the wee hill and onto the trail.



Milngavie to Balmaha (Miles 0 to 19)

I spent the first couple of miles settling into a very comfortable pace, passing people and letting others pass me so that I was happy. I had two goals for this section. First, to keep my morale high in the darkness of the early morning, and second to run at my target pace.

When I'd run my 20 mile 1am practice run, I was a bit low until the sun began to rise. No such problems now though; the buzz of the race was clearly having a positive effect!

I had a clear pacing strategy for the whole race. As 96 miles was such a huge step up for me, just finishing was my main goal. But I was also naively optimistic that if everything played out well, I had a good chance of sneaking in just under 24 hours. So a couple of months ago I'd created a pacing strategy that, if I stuck to it, would see me finish in 23:41. Those extra 19 minutes were contingency. 5 weeks out from race day I'd run the first 50 miles from Milngavie to Auchtertyre. It went tremendously well, I was able to keep to my pacing plan, and I finished knowing that I had a lot more left to give. It was definitely the most comfortable I've ever felt on a 50 mile run and a huge confidence booster.

The plan said I should reach the Beech Tree Inn at 2:10am, and that's exactly when I got there. So far, so good, and I was really happy.

Shortly after the Beech Tree Inn I crossed a minor road and saw tall metal gates blocking the road about 50 metres in front of me. This didn't look right at all and I knew I'd somehow made a navigational error. As I turned round another runner came towards me, and we both backtracked and picked up the correct trail. We ran together for a few miles, swapping stories and finding out that we have a Stornoway-related connection 😊. Shortly after Gartness I stopped to walk a hill and Jimmy pressed on. It had been good to chat and I hope he finished in a good time.

Approaching Drymen we were greeted by a big corridor of supporters in the field, quietly giving encouragement. They were brilliant! This was my first experience of how support crews, friends and families were going to be behind their runners the whole way, and how warm the atmosphere was going to be.

My schedule had me hitting Drymen at 3:02am, and I arrived bang on schedule. Even better, I hadn't had to adjust my pace at all yet to hit the targets: they were falling perfectly with my natural pace.

Beyond Drymen the route starts to climb, and I could feel the temperature dropping. However I was still perfectly happy about not having my jacket on, but was also glad it was in my running vest in case I needed it. The sun soon appeared as well, which felt really good, and I switched my head torch off after leaving Garadhban Forest on the approach to the lower slopes of Conic Hill. The hill itself was fine; wetter and muddier than on my training runs, but it didn't present any difficulties. I got to the high point a whopping one minute early at 4:08am, and then took it easy on the descent. It would be very easy to turn an ankle here, and I actually heard a pop coming from my groin as I jumped off one of the big boulders that form the path. I hoped it wouldn't cause me any problems later - and indeed it never came back at all. I'd also heard loads of warnings not to tank it down Conic Hill because my quads would regret it later, and so that was another reason to take it easy.

I arrived at the Balmaha checkpoint bang on schedule at 4:24am. So far, my pacing had felt easy, natural, it was perfectly on track, and things couldn't have been going better. I was feeling great, physically and mentally!

Balmaha to Rowerdennan (Miles 19 to 27)

The Balmaha car park was packed with support crews and their vehicles. In fact, it felt as if I was the only runner without a crew here! I'd originally planned for Kat to meet me here, but she was out of action after having an operation on her ankle, and I'd decided to run solo until Auchtertyre rather than asking Lyn to have a very long day: she was currently fast asleep back at the Airbnb. So, on arriving at the checkpoint I picked up my drop bag, found a quiet spot, and started to do what I had to do. Michael saw me and offered to refill my bladder with my Tailwind mix, which was a great help. I restocked my food in my pack, ate a pot of creamed rice, drank a small bottle of flat Coke, packed away my headtorch, put my pack back on, and took two small muffins and a Mars Bar from my drop bag to eat as I set off. I binned the rest of my drop bag and my empties, and I was off again. I'd planned 10 minutes for this checkpoint, and although I felt as if I'd only used half of it, I was surprised to see that it had taken me the full 10 minutes to change over. Anyway, I was still perfectly on schedule.

There's a funny wee bit of the route just after Balmaha where it leaves the main path and climbs up a small hill and then back down again to rejoin the path. I was aware that I was going a bit slow here, partly because there were some slower runners in front and partly because I was shovelling muffins and a Mars Bar into my mouth.

Anyway, once over that I settled back into my natural, easy pace. I really enjoy the stretch from Balmaha to Rowerdennan as there's a nice variety: flat bits, hilly bits, bridges, steps, and good views across Loch Lomond. Some of it was really steep, but thanks to my recce runs I knew how long they lasted and so I just enjoyed them.

I think it was on this section that I began to feel my bum cheeks getting a bit warm, as if they were in the very early stages of chaffing. My crew had talc and Vaseline, and so I spent a few minutes thinking about what the best thing to do would be, and more importantly, who would help me do it 🤔. I finally decided that I'd get Lyn to sprinkle a generous helping of talc over my cheeks, and then I'd rub it in. The boys in the crew weren't going to be let near it, and as Lyn works with young children, and she'd do anything for her big brother, I convinced myself she wouldn't bat an eyelid! As it turned out, the heat subsided and I forgot all about it until the day after the race.

I arrived at Rowerdennan at 6:05am, one minute early, and with a cool bottom. The pacing really was going fantastically well and I felt completely fresh here. I'd completed more than a marathon, and with over 2,500ft of ascent the Alan from the Loch Ness Marathon 10 years ago would never have believed that his 50 year old self would be treating this as just a gentle warm-up 😊.

Rowerdennan to Beinglas (Miles 27 to 41)

I did exactly the same at this checkpoint as the last one, swapping things over, topping up my bladder, eating another creamed rice and setting off with muffins and a Mars Bar, and again I was up and away in 10 minutes. I'd done all this sitting on the wall at the entrance to the toilet block, and I have to compliment whoever designed it because it makes for a very comfy seat!

This is my favourite section of the whole West Highland Way. The narrow, twisty trails between Rowerdennan and Inversnaid, and the more technical section between Inversnaid and Beinglas are my idea of heaven! My favourite training runs are on terrain like this. The trails were wet and muddy in places today, but I barely noticed as I was in my element.

When I ran this on my 50 mile training run a few weeks ago, there were a lot of walkers picking their way slowly over the terrain, but I had run past them without stopping, skipping up and over the boulders and tree roots with lots of energy. I expected to go a bit slower today, and as with the earlier sections I just ran at a comfortable pace. So, I was very surprised and very happy to arrive at Inversnaid at 7:51am, 8 minutes earlier than planned.

As I ran towards the dibber a volunteer asked me for my race number, so I told him 114, and after dibbing I ran past the drop bags and towards the onwards trail as I'd decided a few weeks ago that I wouldn't be stopping here. That was when I realised I'd been asked for my race number so that another volunteer could get my drop bag for me, and I think she was relieved that I just ran past her and that they hadn't lost it 😊.

As I was leaving Inversnaid I passed a runner who commented on what lay ahead in this section, and he noted that Beinglas was at the 42 mile mark. Now, my Bible for the day was

a little piece of paper, covered in sellotape to keep it waterproof and folded up into one of the pockets in my shorts, that contained info to keep me sane and on pace. Based on my recce runs I'd printed out the distance to each checkpoint and some intermediate places too, my target time for reaching them (and leaving them if I planned to stop), and what my average pace needed to be between each one. All very sad 🙄 but I've found this helps me massively in ultras and it was a revelation when I did it for the first time. My focus throughout the race was only ever on the next checkpoint, and never any further (although there was one exception which I'll come to later), and all I needed to know was how far away it was and when I needed to get there - my squashed sellotape-covered piece of paper had all the numbers. So, I knew it wasn't 42 miles to Beinglas, but only 41 😊, and after a wee bit of jovial banter we carried on at our respective paces.

In the middle of the technical section I passed Stuart. It was good to finally see someone I knew, so we had a very quick chat and I carried on. After the technical section he caught up, and we ran together all the way to Beinglas, having a really good conversation on the way.

I arrived at Beinglas at 8:37am, 7 minutes earlier than planned. I was still feeling tremendous, and in fact I couldn't believe how good I was feeling ... and ahead of schedule. When I reached here in the Fling I was really struggling, and sat for quite a while before slowly hirpling onwards. Today, on the other hand, I felt as fresh as I did when I started.

The volunteers here were AWESOME!! They refilled my bladder for me, took away my rubbish, and made me a cup of tea. What more can you ask for?! I didn't hang about though, sticking to my planned 10 minute stop.

Beinglas to Auchtertyre (Miles 41 to 50)

The stretch from Beinglas to the tunnel under the A82 is one of my least favourite parts of the Way. I think it goes back to the first time I ran it on a recce run for the Fling, when I was very tired and just found it a drudge. I don't like the surface, the surroundings feel sparse, and it's very open. Anyway, I passed a few walkers here and they were all very friendly and encouraging. I walked the WHW two years in a row about 30 years ago, and so I could imagine how much they were all enjoying it.

At some point in this section I heard a voice behind me and it was Stuart again. I'd assumed he'd left Beinglas before me, but no. So we ran together up to Cow Poo Alley when he took off and I followed behind a bit more slowly. Why? Well, I'd reached the A82 tunnel at 11:43, 21 minutes earlier than planned and 21 minutes faster than I had on my 50 mile training run. This was a massive surprise as I'd continued to run at a very comfortable pace. I couldn't believe how well things were going! I sent a message to give my crew the heads-up that I was 20 minutes ahead of schedule, and then I deliberately slowed down and walked bits that I'd normally have run. I was very wary of going too fast and burning myself out even if I felt good (lesson learned from previous ultras!), so I played it safe and sensible and took it VERY easy.

It was pretty wet in the area around Cow Poo Alley and there were a few wee water crossings, but knowing that I was going to change my socks and shoes at Auchtertyre I just ploughed through them and made no effort to stay dry.

Next up was the Rollercoaster which I really like. I ran and skipped over the rocks here with legs that were still feeling fresh. I ran some of it with a runner from Windsor and we swapped good stories about other races. We caught up with Stuart at the start of the final descent through the forestry works, and from there it was a quick run downhill, over the road and on to Auchtertyre.

Recent rain meant that the checkpoint wasn't at the field as usual but a bit further on, on the farm road. I arrived at the field at 11:55, 9 minutes early, feeling in tip top condition.

Auchtertyre checkpoint (50 miles)

I'd brought my SPOT tracker with me so that my crew could see where I was throughout the day, and it also allowed me to send them a message when I was nearing each checkpoint. The plan was to press the button that sent the message when I was about a mile away from the checkpoint so that they could get ready for me, and it worked really well. When I arrived at Auchtertyre, Alan M was there waiting for me and ran with me to the car so that I didn't waste any time trying to find it.

It was great to see Alan and Lyn and they had everything set up perfectly for me: a chair, a small camping table with my food and drinks laid out and ready to eat and drink, a rug to put my feet on, my fresh socks and shoes, replacement plasters for my nipples (I'd sent them a message from Beinglas as the first plasters had come off, and replacing them was not up for debate 🤔) and a warm jacket in case I needed it. Brilliant!!

I'd always planned to change into fresh socks and shoes here, and even though when I got here I felt my feet were totally fine and that I didn't need to change, I changed them anyway. I kept thinking of a [blog](#) that John Kelly had written after his DNF on his Wainwrights record attempt: one of the reasons he DNFed was the pain in his feet which he said in hindsight was preventable if only he'd stopped to powder them and dry them off. I figured that if someone of John's calibre can have his goal ruined by not taking care of his feet, then I absolutely could too. So again I put on my sensible head, took off my wet socks and shoes, covered my feet in loads and loads of talc, and put on clean socks and shoes. The socks before and after were Injinji trail socks, and the shoes before and after were Hoka Challenger ATR 6s. My feet just love these socks and shoes!

I toyed with the idea of changing some or all of my clothes too, but decided to stick with what I was wearing because any clean ones would just end up soaked in sweat soon anyway. Alan did recommend that I change my buff, so I did that.

For each checkpoint from here onwards my feeding and drinking plan was to eat a Pot Noodle and a rice pudding while I sat, washed down with flat Coke, tea and diluting juice, sook on quarters of an orange if I fancied it, and then set off with two muffins and a Mars Bar to eat over the next few minutes. My crew would replace my depleted bladder with a fresh

one full of diluted Tailwind. I get on well with Tailwind but can't drink it at the recommended strength; I only use two scoops per 2 litres of water and it's worked well for me in the past. The food I had with me to eat between checkpoints was pouches of baby food (Ella's Kitchen Tomato-y Pasta and Chicken Casserole - yes, as nasty as they sound!) and flapjacks. Until this point it had all worked a treat, although I hadn't eaten as much baby food or flapjacks since Rowerdennan as I'd planned. My crew were to top up my baby food and flapjacks at each checkpoint.

I'm not sure why, but I'd had a picture in my mind of arriving at checkpoints, having a Pot Noodle thrust into my hand, and immediately starting to down it. No time to waste! I think I might have seen this scenario play out on a video on YouTube from a previous WHW Race. Unfortunately that's not what happened here, because I picked up my Pot Noodle after changing my socks and shoes to find that it hadn't been stirred and the sauce hadn't been added. Incredibly, this really, really annoyed me! It made me think that Lyn wasn't on board with what she had to do. I feel terrible saying that now, but one reason I'm writing this is so that in years to come I can remember what I was going through and how I felt, and this little episode alone says a lot. Thankfully, I didn't say anything to her.

Everything else went fantastically well at this first checkpoint. Alan and Lyn did a grand job. I half joked that they should warn the others who we were meeting at Glencoe that there would be tears by then, because I was starting to feel very early signs that my emotions were close to going south. My reaction to the Pot Noodle was an early indicator.

I'd planned to be at Auchtertyre for 15 minutes, but it turned into 25 🤔. I still don't know how this happened as we were keeping a close eye on the time; I think it might just have been because it was our first checkpoint together and so we were still learning how to be as efficient as possible. The good news was that thanks to me being ahead when I arrived, I left pretty much bang on schedule.



Auchtertyre to Bridge of Orchy (Miles 50 to 60)

This is where things started to get a bit tough.

Eating became a big problem. I struggled big time to eat the two small muffins. My mouth was too dry to chew them. The Mars Bar was a pretty small one from a multi-pack but it took about 30 minutes to eat. Baby food pouches were a slow slow job despite their contents being sloppy sludge (which is what makes them so good for ultras). And the flapjacks were out of the question. I'd warned my crew that at some point I'd struggle to eat but that they had to make sure I did, no matter what. And Alan did a sterling job, making sure I was eating and drinking, over and over and over again. It's a weird feeling when someone is forcing you to do something you just can't do and don't want to do, but you know they're doing it for your own good and so you're actually pleased that they're being so cruel to you. Short of pinning me to the ground and ramming food into my mouth, Alan did everything he could, and although I didn't manage to eat all that I'd planned, I was at least taking in something.

The weather had been fantastic so far, but it was starting to turn as well. The wind built up here, and I had to put my jacket on to give me some protection. I'm a bit tight when it comes to buying gear. I can't imagine myself spending anywhere near £100 on a jacket or anything apart from shoes for that matter, so my jacket is one from Decathlon. But I like it a lot and it has served me well, and it was perfect today.

My pace also began to drop here. My legs still felt totally fresh, but I didn't have the speed. Maybe it was the wind or maybe the lack of sleep? I'd now been awake for 29 hours and run 2 back to back marathons, so maybe it's understandable!

And then perhaps the biggest impacting change of all was that I started to feel low. This was where the mental challenge started, made worse by the fact that I was still raging about the Pot Noodle 🤔. I asked Alan to send Lyn a message telling her she needed to have it properly ready for me arriving at the next checkpoint. As I'm writing this I can't believe that I made him do it! Thankfully he toned it down a bit and what he said to Lyn was much better than what I'd said to him 🙏.

This is one of the easier sections of the route, and so all these difficulties were bearable. I was still enjoying the actual running, especially the downhill bits.

We ran down to the railway line, through the underpass, and were greeted by the very unexpected sight of Lyn at its mouth. The checkpoint is further down the hill, across the main road and over the bridge, but Lyn had been directed up here by the marshalls. No worries, she had set up stall and got everything ready. Well, almost everything ...

In the run-up to the race loads of excellent pieces of advice for first time crews had been posted on Facebook by people who had crewed before, and I'd been forwarding them all to our WhatsApp group. Some comments had said that the runner will have some "diva moments" and that the crew should expect them and do whatever the runner said. Well, this is where I had my big diva moment. And it was over another Pot Noodle 🤔. I sat down, picked it up, stuck the fork in, and hit the massive block of hard noodles that is in the tub

when you first open it. The water wasn't hot enough, the noodles hadn't cooked, and they weren't mixed with the mysterious powdery stuff you find in a Pot Noodle. I was not a happy bunny. In fact the baby food had turned me into a toddler who wasn't getting what he wanted, and this time I wasn't going to hide it! As I crunched my way through the noodles, trying to muster up some saliva to make them edible, I tried to catch Alan's eye to tell him this was not acceptable, no siree. Lyn was busy replacing my bladder with a new full one, and after she finished she came over and I'm ashamed to say I told her about the Pot Noodle and in a pretty blunt way. I wasn't ashamed to say it at the time though; no, I was in full diva mode and just wanted to make sure she knew and didn't do it again! And to make me feel even more ashamed, a week after the race I found out that Lyn was innocent in the whole debacle - we arrived earlier than she was expecting because Alan and I misjudged the time it would take to reach her. So, I'm just thankful that I'd pre-warned all of my crew about diva moments.

After finishing the Pot Noodle I brushed my teeth, which felt great. One of the marshalls had told Lyn that we had to carry full wet weather gear with us on the next section because the weather was due to turn, so Lyn put my waterproof trousers into my running vest for me.

I told Lyn and Alan again - although more seriously this time - to let the others know that there would be tears at Glencoe, and in fact it took me all my time not to sob there and then as I told them. Anyway, Alan and I got up and set off, me with my newly stocked vest and my two muffins and Mars Bar in hand. I walked down the steep hill to the main road as I'd stiffened up a bit while sitting down, and I wanted to ease back into running gently.

At the main road one of the marshalls checked that we had our wet weather gear with us. I dibbed at the checkpoint at 2:40pm. My schedule had me leaving there at 2:35pm, and although I was only 5 minutes late which is trivial over the course of 24 hours, it was a hefty chunk out of the 19 minutes contingency I had, and I still had 36 miles to go. Thankfully I didn't realise this at the time as it would have made my morale even lower, but instead I thought I was still on schedule.



Bridge of Orchy to Glencoe Ski Centre (Miles 60 to 70)

My race strategy from the start had been to walk the uphill, run the flats, and run the downhill if it wasn't too rough underfoot. This section starts with the climb up Jelly Baby Hill, and so we walked most of it. The wind really picked up here, but my jacket was doing its job of protecting me from it. To be honest the weather didn't bother me at all as I don't think I've ever let it stop me going out on a training run. I was out when the Beast from the East was in town, I've almost been running on the spot when the wind has been so strong, and of course running in rain is par for the course in Scotland.

I had to give up eating my muffins. I think I managed one and maybe a small bite out of the other. The Mars Bar stayed with me for a while as I tried to eat it.

At the top of Jelly Baby Hill the flags were getting battered by the wind. The hardy guy who was there asked Alan and I which one was the runner, and when I said it was me I was presented with my jelly baby. It felt like an early prize-giving 😊. I posed for a photo at the 100km marker, ate my jelly baby, we headed off again, and soon dropped down to Inveroran. My legs were still feeling great, but I was feeling weak and so I dipped into my emergency gels: a couple of Clif Blok chews. These have helped me on previous ultras, but I only eat them when I need a boost, preferring to stick to real food otherwise (if you can call baby food real food!). Alan also had some cherry flavoured ones and suggested I try one as they tasted good. So I had three, and I can't argue with him - they went down a treat.

We left the road and started up the track over Rannoch Moor. It was still very windy and I was still feeling low, so I switched off to everything else and just focused on the ground in front of me, making sure I didn't stumble on the cobbles. I later found out that Alan told the

rest of the crew at the next checkpoint that I'd gone through periods of not saying anything and then chatting away quite happily. The quiet periods were definitely when I was at my lowest and I didn't have the mental energy to hold a conversation. Alan saw me at my lowest points of the whole race, and all credit to him for putting up with me while encouraging me to eat and drink every few minutes, constantly checking the pace and working out if we were on schedule or not, pushing me when we were falling behind, and setting me points to run to before saying I could stop and walk. Slowly I began to feel a bit more with it, and I was still running steadily. We passed at least a couple of runners on this stretch which felt great, and my legs were still not complaining.

I was starting to perk up a bit as the ski centre came into sight, and it was raining. There are two streams to cross just before the road up to the car park, and I was delighted to see my other two runners - Dale and Rodger - waiting for me at the first one. Dale was videoing me, and it's good to watch me running down the rough track here, moving at a good pace. A little further on were Lyn and my final crew member, Alan S. Lyn was also videoing, and I was definitely shifting!

I dibbed here at 5:21pm. At the time I thought I was bang on track, but I was actually 11 minutes late. I'm mightily glad I didn't realise this, because my morale would have plummeted. It would have put the tin lid on something I'd realised towards the end of the section from Bridge of Orchy: I had made two mistakes when planning my pace for the final bits of the race. First, I hadn't accounted for stopping at Lundavra. My original plan had been to run straight through it, but a few weeks ago when Alan S had offered to meet me there I bit his hand off as I knew I'd need the morale boost. So that would be 10 minutes of unplanned stoppage. Second, I'd worked out my target pace for each section by looking at the times of previous runners who'd finished in just under 24 hours. But what I'd forgotten to take into account was that they had stopped at the Leisure Centre, whereas this year the finish was about 5 minutes further on. So that was a combined 15 minutes of unplanned time, and I could feel the 24 hour target slipping away from me. I explained this to Dale who assured me that it would be fine, so I put my trust in him and believed him.



Glencoe Ski Centre to Kinlochleven (Miles 70 to 81)

My Pot Noodle was perfect! I ate that and my rice, drank my drinks, and basically did nothing else while my crew did loads of stuff at super fast speed. What a team! A marshall had told us that waterproof trousers now had to be worn to proceed, so Alan S got mine from my running vest and put them on me. He checked I was warm enough and put a warm jacket on me. Rodger, who was taking over the running from Alan M, put his waterproof trousers on. Lyn and Alan S restocked my pack with food. They all had a copy of my pacing Bible, so Rodger was working out times and paces based on the reality of where I was now. I wanted to know what the total distance to Kinlochleven was (81 miles) and when I needed to get there (8:17pm), but I just could not remember those two numbers. My brain was exhausted. I asked Rodger several times what the distance and target time was, and each time he patiently told me, but it just wouldn't stick in my head. There's a video of this which makes me laugh. I was mentally done 😂.



The food, drink and attention did me the world of good because I left the checkpoint feeling re-energised. I left at 5:33pm, a massive 13 minutes later than scheduled, but my brain was too tired to notice. I thought I was still on schedule. And guess what? I hadn't cried after all!

Rodger and I set off down the road from the car park. I felt brilliant! My waterproof trousers (Decathlon again) felt brilliant! I felt cosy (but not sweaty) and comfortable inside despite the wind and rain. My legs still felt brilliant!

I'd done a recce run from the ski centre to the finish a couple of months earlier, and it had cast a serious doubt in my mind that I could complete the race in 24 hours. It had been my first time running from the ski centre to the bottom of the Devil's Staircase and I'd been unpleasantly surprised at how hilly and rough underfoot it was. That, coupled with the later big hills, was pretty concerning in terms of pace. Thankfully I didn't notice the rough miles to the bottom of the Devil's Staircase tonight. Maybe it's because I was just so focused on what was immediately in front of me, or maybe it was because I was really enjoying talking with Rodger. I don't know if he'd planned what to talk about, but it was perfect. I really, really enjoyed it. We talked pretty much the whole way, and that really helped.

I've been up the Devil's Staircase a few times and always thought it passed relatively quickly. Not tonight though; it seemed to go on forever. Half way up it I felt as if I was heading dangerously close to bonk territory, so we stopped and I had another couple of Clif Bloks. I asked Rodger to open the new packet for me, so I guess I must have still been preserving every ounce of energy. My ability to eat hadn't improved at all since way back at Auchtertyre.

At some point on The Neverending Staircase we were talking about school days. I commented on how my PE teacher gave me a D or an E every year for effort and performance. How many of my school year, I wondered, could do what I was doing now? I think my exact words to Rodger were, "An E for effort? GIRUY Mr Harvey!".

I'd heard tales of people really struggling to run or even walk down the other side of the Devil's Staircase because their quads were shot, but mine were still feeling as fresh as when I started. My legs' strength and performance had been one of the biggest surprises in the race for me. The way that I train isn't exactly textbook. Basically, I just run for the enjoyment of it. I don't do hill reps, intervals, strides, speed sessions, Fartleks, or anything like that (and I barely know what half of them mean 🤔) - I just run at a pace that lets me enjoy my run ... because I run for enjoyment. The number of miles I run comes from a training plan in a book, but I always try to make them hilly miles, ideally on trails. And they're almost always loops as I have a thing against out-and-back routes. They just seem too artificial; I much prefer running a loop so that I've been on a wee tour and seen some nice sights. There is a time for out-and-backs - usually when I'm tired and just want to get my run over and done with without going far from home, but on the whole I avoid them. The reason I mention all this is that I had wondered if my simple training wasn't going to cut it on the race. I had a concern that by the time I got here, I'd be wincing in pain as I slowly walked down the back of the Devil's Staircase. I needn't have worried, because my legs were still feeling amazing, and so I ran down here without the slightest pain or hesitation. My training strategy had clearly worked for me 😊. I read an interview with Sabrina Verjee a while ago, after she'd broken the Wainwrights record, and what she said struck such a chord with me that I'm going to quote her.

"Life is short. My running is me time, relaxing time. I'm happier taking a map and bimbaling around for eight hours at my leisurely pace than I am trying to run up and down the same hill 20 times."

That's me in a nutshell. It was those words that made me stick to how I train, because if this training approach was good enough for her on her monstrous challenge, then they sure were good enough for me too.

I enjoyed the rest of the run into Kinlochleven. We were moving at a really good pace the whole way, but I was still feeling comfortable and being careful not to push it and ruin things at this late stage. Dale had walked over to meet us at the junction with the main road through the town, and as we approached him he said we were ahead of schedule (yay!), and Rodger replied to say I was running as if I'd only just started. Honestly, it's amazing how wee comments like this had such a massive, positive effect on my mood!

I ran straight into the Leven Centre and right up to the desk to dib at such a pace that one of the volunteers commented on it. "See what wearing waterproof trousers does to you?" she said, and I replied that I was so grateful we'd been made to wear them. I'm sure it was one reason I was feeling so good. I dibbed at 8:13pm, 4 minutes ahead of my 24 hour schedule.

I went straight back outside and my support team swung into action like a well-oiled machine. They were Formula One pitstop class now. Another perfect Pot Noodle, rice, flat Coke and drinks were downed, but as with Glencoe I didn't bother taking the muffins: I just couldn't eat them. I took another Mars Bar though for the next section. Since Auchtertyre I'd barely been able to eat any of the baby food - just one or one and half pouches per section - so I kept some of them on me.

This would be the last time I'd see Lyn until the finish line. She'd done an awesome job since Auchtertyre (except for the Pot Noodle incidents 🤦), in fact since the previous afternoon, doing everything I needed or wanted, and she was now leaving to check in to our Airbnb in Fort William. She later told me she'd been worried when she saw me at Glencoe as I'd looked so grey, but she was relieved to see I had a lot more colour in me here at Kinlochleven.



Kinlochleven to Lundavra (Miles 81 to 88)

I was at the checkpoint for a few minutes longer than the 10 I'd planned, but left bang on schedule at 8:27pm. Dale took over the running from Rodger here. He was going to see me to the finish. I'd known I wanted him to run the last part with me as soon as I'd received the email to say I had a place in the race because thanks to our mountain marathon adventures, he's seen me when I've been absolutely knackered, he knows what kind of person I am when that happens, and we get on really well when it happens. He's also run this section before, knows it very well, and is very savvy in all outdoorsy things. And he also knows that I need to eat a lot to keep going!

As we walked out of the car park I said to him that I'd been serious when I'd said I was concerned about the mistakes I'd made in planning the final section. I said to him that I'd done great all day, I'd stuck to my planned schedule, and I didn't want to throw it all away now at the last part. He told me it would be fine and that I'd do it.

It then hit me that I didn't have a warm jacket in my running vest for the last section. The cold of the night from my 1am recce a couple of weeks ago had made me decide before the race that I didn't want to take any chances and that I should have something warm with me from here to the end, especially given the height and exposure on the route. My crew knew this too but in all the excitement had forgotten to pack it at the checkpoint. We were literally only 10 or 20 seconds away from the checkpoint and so I told (not asked, told 🤦) Dale to go back and get my warm grey jacket. I kept walking, and a few seconds later started to run as I was still feeling really good. A minute later I heard Dale sprinting to catch up with me. They couldn't find my grey jacket so he'd brought a warm layer instead and he packed it into my vest. Just then Lyn pulled up in the car beside us, looking panicked about the jacket, but Dale and I were happy with the alternative and so Dale told her just to go on.

Dale quickly took over from Rodger in the good chat stakes, and I enjoyed him wittering away about lots of things. He does tell a good story. When we got to the top of the climb out of Kinlochleven he told me that he and Rodger had planned to come up here yesterday and hang some purple monkeys from the trees so that I'd think I was hallucinating. I'd told them that hallucinations this late in the race aren't unusual and so they clearly hadn't wanted me to miss out! Sadly it hadn't happened.

I normally don't like the Lairig, but I really enjoyed it tonight. Dale led perfectly. He ran in front of me to shield me from the weather (it was still blowing a hooley and raining), picked out the best parts of the trail so that I just had to follow him, and shouted STEP! whenever we came to a step, drainage ditch or other obstacle so that I was prepared. He also did what Alan M and Rodger had done as well, which was to get to gates first and open them for me so that I could run straight through without stopping. That sounds like a small thing but it really helps keep the momentum going and, well, it just makes you feel special - which I needed at various points in the race.

We made great time here, and the further we went the more I became confident that I was going to hit my 24 hour target. We passed other runners on this section. Some were clearly suffering, but my legs were honestly still feeling fresh. I had to keep checking myself to see if they really were as fresh as I felt they were, and every time the answer was yes, they are feeling great. I'd waited all day for the cramp to arrive or for my quads to ache or for my legs to simply get tired, but none of that happened. I'm still amazed by that.

We arrived at Lundavra at 10:27pm. The fairy lights and camp fire were a beautiful sight in such horrible weather. I'd told Dale that this had to be a quick stop, and so we were gone by 10:35pm. In those 8 minutes I ate yet another Pot Noodle. I was absolutely sick of them by now, but they were working magic and so I forced one down. I'd been eating much less than I'd planned for most of the day, well short of the 60-90g of carbs per hour that I'd planned, but the Pot Noodles, rice, Tailwind, drinks, Mars Bars and the occasional baby food had done the trick. One of my biggest concerns going into the race was that I wouldn't be able to eat, and I knew from previous experience in other races that this would spell disaster and was the biggest risk to me not finishing. But this cut down eating that I was doing seemed to be working fine, possibly supported by my blood virtually being liquid pasta when I started 😊. So yes, my fifth Pot Noodle in ten and a half hours had to be eaten.

Lundavra to Fort William (Miles 88 to 96)

I'd put my head torch on my head at Lundavra, and shortly afterwards I switched it on. It soon became dark - and I mean really dark - as we were miles away from any lights and surrounded by hills and trees.

I ran really well in this section and Dale continued to lead perfectly. We passed more runners, my legs still feeling unbelievably fresh, and I got a wee boost from passing them, knowing that it confirmed how fresh I was.

Alan S had driven to the Braveheart car park to meet us in case I needed anything for the final push. Before the race I was certain I would, but a mile or so from the car park Dale and

I had a chat, and Dale phoned Alan to say we wouldn't be stopping. Not only were we running, but we were running at a decent pace. In fact at several points over the last hour I'd shouted "Faster!" to Dale as he ran in front of me; he wasn't going slowly but I was enjoying the run so much I just wanted to go faster. As we approached the car park we spotted Alan who had walked up to meet us. The three of us ran down to the car park together, Alan and Dale talking, me just running, and at the car park Alan headed to the car to drive to the finish while Dale and I carried on.

It felt great to hit the road, knowing I had nearly done it. We ran past the old finish line at the Leisure Centre and on to the Nevis Centre.

For weeks I'd had a vision of how I'd finish. I'd been at a concert at the Nevis Centre in April, and had looked at the kerbs, semi-joking to my friend that I probably wouldn't be able to get up or down them by the time I got here. I also imagined Dale running inside ahead of me, with seconds to go before the clock struck 1am, shouting, "Get the dibbing machine! Get the dibbing machine!", in an effort to allow me to dib in the final seconds under 24 hours. Neither happened. I almost sprinted over the kerbs and into the centre, finishing in 23 hours 15 minutes.

I was absolutely over the moon! Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I'd finish in a time like that and feeling strong - both physically and mentally. I was absolutely amazed at what I'd just done!

Me, Dale, Lyn and Alan S had hugs, I happily posed for photos, and then we sat and had tea and toast served up by the amazing volunteers. We stayed until after 1am, keen to see the runners coming in under 24 hours. Most of them looked like how I had expected to be: physically sore and very teary. That's been me on some other races and so I totally empathised, but it also amazed me even more that I wasn't feeling the same way. I was really happy - no tears or struggles to speak today - and my body felt great!



Afterwards

Lyn and I headed to our Airbnb and I went to bed. I couldn't be bothered showering 🙄. I woke up 4 hours later and immediately remembered what I'd just done. There was no chance of falling asleep again, so I got up and had a cuppa tea.

After showering we had the biggest fry-up breakfast Weatherspoons had to offer (along with loads of other runners!) and then headed to the prize-giving. Dale and Lisa, and Alan S and Pauline had stayed overnight at the ski centre, and the four of them came back up to join Lyn and me at the prize-giving. I was really pleased they were there because the run had been a team effort. None of my crew had crewed before; only one had run an ultra before; one isn't a runner at all; but they were all absolutely awesome, they couldn't do enough for me, and I couldn't have done it without them.

I might already have mentioned once or twice that I was amazed at my physical state 😊. Not only did I feel great, but I had no blisters, only very slight stiffness in my legs the next day (I was able to walk down our stairs at home without holding the bannister, whereas after

other races I've had to bump down the stairs on my bum) and no DOMS at all the following day, I had no cramp afterwards, and in fact the only way I knew what I'd done was that my left Achilles was slightly stiff and I couldn't stop eating.

The race had lived up to all the hype I'd heard, and more. I'll never forget it ❤️.

