

## WHW TALES 2009

Almost as soon as I had completed the WHW race in 2008 I knew I wanted to run it again in 2009. I had enjoyed the experience so much I wanted to repeat it. It had been my 1<sup>st</sup> attempt and I thought that with another year's experience and training I would have a good chance of going under the 22 hours.

My training and build up hadn't gone to plan however. Firstly, my training during the year changed. Having been selected to represent Scotland for the 100K earlier in the year, my focus completely changed. I trained for 100K on tarmac. I neglected the off-road and hill training runs. Just before the 100K I had a bad fall and injured my knee. This affected my training and confidence. But I ran the race in spite of it, probably not doing it any favours. I then ran the London Marathon. I couldn't give this up as I had a championship start and a good weekend away, which I wasn't about to miss. Then came the opportunity of the Glenrothes 50K. I'd never done a 50K before and it seemed too good an opportunity to miss. I thought I could get under 4 hours. I didn't. I did these races "OK" but not great, on a gammy knee. The knee got better and 4 weeks before the WHW race, I ran the WHW over 3 days. I thought this would be great training – back to back long runs, over the terrain I'd been neglecting, and also lot of fun. It was great fun, and I do think it was really good training, but unfortunately, on the last day, I developed a tendonitis in my left lower leg. Over the next week this got worse and stopped me running. I attended a physio for the next 3 weeks. He gave me intense massage and ultrasound and did everything he could to get me to the start line of the race. I rested from running like I'd never rested before. Things settled a week before the race and after a few tester runs, I made the decision that I would do the race. I knew it was risky. I knew there was a good chance it would flare up during the race and may force me to pull out, but I wanted to give it a try. This was supposedly my big race of the year, even though the focus had shifted several times, and I didn't want to give up on it. And you never know, I might run well on rested legs.

So I got in the right frame of mind over the next week and focussed on getting organised for the race. I felt as ready as I could be. Before the race started, I met up with all the other Carnegie Harriers who were in the race this year. A record 8 of us. Scott was doing it for the 1<sup>st</sup> time and I knew he was capable of doing something special. The same with Richie, who was as fit as he'd ever been and I hoped he could do the same. Stevie was also doing it for the 1<sup>st</sup> time and would be a bit of an unknown. It was a bit of a worry when he asked where the 1<sup>st</sup> checkpoint was, just before the race started! Ian Thompson was also a race virgin and was suitably nervous about the task he was about to face. The twins seemed relaxed and Lynne looked nervous as usual. Like me, she wanted to beat last year's time, but felt ill prepared. We planned to run together as much as possible to help each other along and to keep each other company. Because of the 4 hour rule, where a runner cannot have a support runner till they are over 4 hours behind the leader, there was a risk if we did the times we hoped for, we would not get company till Lundavra, if at all. We both thrive on company and this was not a nice prospect to run for so long on our own.

I registered, got weighed, gave a blood and urine sample as per the research project they were doing this year. I then had a jam roll + cup of tea, got my gear together, obligatory team photo, then the race started.

We were way at the back at the start, which didn't seem too much of an issue, but it did take a long time to pass people who were in the way. Lynne and I were running OK and found ourselves running more of the ups than we'd planned. We had to keep reminding each other to walk some bits. I first saw Steven at the Beech tree. He gave me a caffeine gel as requested. I only really wanted this because I'd had it last year and it seemed to work for me. Onward towards Drymen and I felt OK. This time a piece of fruit cake. Steven told me we were a bit behind schedule. This was a bit of a disappointment as I felt we'd run fairly well. On the downside, the skin on my little toe had "gone" already and was pretty sore, and I was beginning to feel the pain from the tendonitis at this stage. But on towards Conic Hill.

The head torch came off before the ascent. The ascent was OK and as dry underfoot as I'd ever seen it. My descent was rubbish as usual but what's new? Lynne was getting away from me, but not as far as last year. Steven came out to meet me, which is always a welcome sight. I stopped for a rice pudding and coffee, but could only stomach half of it. My stomach was beginning to play up, feeling squeamish. I was drinking plenty and draining my camel back. The weather was OK but close and I was sweating a lot. Lynne was beginning to have problems with her guts and I waited for her to finish her "pit stop". I didn't want to separate at this stage. From Balmaha to Rowardenan my other little toe "went". Nothing to do but grit my teeth till the acute pain subsided to a chronic lesser pain. I started to get cramp in my right quad. This could have been because of the way I was running with blistered feet and/or pain in my left leg, or lack of salt due to sweating. I took half a Nuun tablet, which seemed to help. It was a bit of a slog to Rowardenan. I was really tired when I got there. I needed an urgent toilet stop and only just got there in time! I only managed a few mouthfuls of Oatiflakes and cranberries. My stomach felt a bit rubbish. Lynne waited for me this time and off we went, knowing it would be a long time till we saw our support again. They were not allowed to stop at BeinGlass Farm or Derrydarroch, but rather Carmyle Cottage. This was psychologically very hard. Lynne had major problems over the 1<sup>st</sup> part of this section as she had to keep dashing off onto bushes for toilet stops. I would wait for her, but it rapidly became apparent that when we did start again, she was stronger, so I ended up walking on and she'd always catch me up. We both admitted to feeling quite breathless on the inclines, even walking, and weren't sure why. Possibly the closeness of the weather? We came to the rocky section – one of my least favourite sections. I was really struggling, especially as my feet were so sore. Every step hurt. Lynne was obviously stronger and was disappearing off into the distance. I hoped she'd just carry on. I ran/walked/scrambled with another couple of runners, Jeff from Ireland and Ellen. They were great company. Just past Derrydarroch I saw Simon and Steven who'd run out to meet me. It was great to see them and hear that Lynne was bashing on. She was apparently going to wait for me at Auchtertyre farm, but I was struggling and said I really wanted her to go on. I changed over from the camel back to the bumbag, which was OK. I think I had some Slimfast here, but not much. Nothing tasted very good. Off to Auchtertyre just in time to wave Lynne off. I was weighed, and lost a whole 3lb – wow! Managed a few mouthfuls of potato here I think. The food intake is now a bit of a blur. I was taking blocks + chews though and had had a power bar. I was forcing myself to eat small amounts.

Then onto Tyndrum. The section from there onto Bridge of Orchy took forever. This is normally my favourite section. It's so runnable compared to other sections. But my feet were getting worse. I couldn't explain how sore they were. I didn't want to take my shoes off, partly because I knew it would be so painful and hard to get started again, but also I was frightened what we'd find. But I had no choice. So I forced Steven and Paul to do what they swore they never would do, and that is "DO MY FEET!" It was not a pretty sight. I was blistering on the inside of both heels – a new place for me. It was agony. It was good to see Christian and Ian here, but not nice to let them see what a state my feet were in. I was cleaned up and re Compeeded, had a ham sandwich and off I went. This time with Paul as my support runner. I was far enough behind now to have someone run with me, which was much needed. We walked up the hill, then I realised that things really had changed as I was now having to walk the descents as well as the ascents, because of my feet. I was really only running the flats. This made for very slow progress. Paul kept me going though with his banter and the time passed more quickly, at least in my head. As we jogged over Rannoch Moor, Paul got a call from Ian Taylor. Scott had won the race in 16 hours 11 mins and Richie was 3<sup>rd</sup> in 16 hours 24 mins. I was so pleased for both of them I was in tears – even though I did have another 30 miles to go! It was quite surreal getting news from Dunfermline about the race that I was still running in over Rannoch Moor! I hoped this news would give me a big boost to up the level of my running. It lasted about 6 steps! Then I was back to the previous painful shuffle. But it did give me something to think about other than myself. As we approached Kingshouse, I had memories from last year when Lesley and Stephen had popped up out of nowhere. I remembered feeling so pleased to see them as I ran down the hill feeling good. This year I was walking, without the smile on my face, chaffed to bits and feeling a bit sorry for myself. Paul would point out bushes or ditches for me to have a pee stop. I would tell him that that was not necessary, he'd just have to look the other direction! I no longer cared what I did or who saw me.

We jogged into Kingshouse and had a wee stop to have a bite to eat, to change clothes and add some layers before going up the Devil's staircase. Steven took over from Paul at the foot of the Devil's staircase. Little did he know how long he'd be sharing my jolly banter till I finished the race. Up hill was hard, getting more short of breath and now with chest pain, but downhill was harder due to the pain in my feet and legs. I walked most of the descent from the Devil's staircase, only really managing to jog when the surface was smooth. We came into Kinlochleven, got weighed again – I had gained 2 lb! and stopped for the loo and some pasta. We didn't hang about because of the midges, which were horrendous.

We had to put our head torches on as we climbed up out of Kinlochleven. I thought one of my Compeeds had slipped as I got even more pain in my heel. We had a look at my feet at the top of the hill. Everything was in place. It was obvious it was just the skin moving underneath. There was nothing I could do other than grit my teeth till it subsided. We got into a wee jog at the top, but as it got darker and the terrain rougher I was slowing down to a walk. I was losing my balance over the rocks, I was getting so tired and sleepy. I wanted to stop but knew we were up a mountain in the middle of nowhere at 2am. We had to keep moving. I sat on a rock for a couple of minutes. Steven helped me on with some more layers. I forced down fluids. My "rocket fuel" was doing nothing. I tried to eat a jam piece. It took 5 minutes to chew and swallow a

piece the size of my finger nail. I was really getting a bit scared at this point. But we started moving again. Very slowly but we were moving forward. Steven tried to phone Paul to let him know how we were and not to worry, but we'd be a while. But he couldn't get through on either his phone or mine. My balance was all over the place. We walked hand in hand over the next 5 miles, kicking and swearing at rocks. We saw a man in a mountain rescue van half way, who checked we were OK. It was very reassuring to see him.

Eventually we got to the forest and soon saw Paul's head torch. As soon as we met him, I held onto his hand for a while till he ran on to put on some soup for me. I had seriously considered whether to continue after Lundavra, on the grounds of safety, and had decided to have a proper stop here, rest and decent food. Maybe even a sleep, then consider whether I could carry on. Paul would hear nothing of pulling out and was keen to get rid of me as soon as possible I think. I sat by the fire for 25 minutes and had a rest, soup and a wee bit pasta. Then gathered myself up and started walking again. It felt safer, closer to home. People knew where we were. Steven and I would get to Fort William if we had to walk every step. So off we went. I was getting more short of breath and chest pain on the inclines, which was concerning me but we pushed on. It was all very slow, but seemed less slow than over the Lairig Mor. What should have been a 2 hour jog in the daylight turns into a 4 hour walk in the dark. No matter how sore or tired I was, I could probably have managed a jog in the daylight, but as soon as it gets dark, the time you take doubles, or even trebles. When we got out of the spooky woods and off the horrible stony path at the top, I managed to start jogging again. I didn't stop till we got through the door of the leisure centre to say No. 27 has finished. Dario came over and gave me a hug, then Steven + Paul. Then I cried. I had finished. I had completed it despite everything, my feet, my tiredness, my injuries, the darkness. I can't say I enjoyed it, but the sense of achievement was enormous. I was weighed again, blood and urine samples taken again. I lost 2lb over the course of the whole race! What a rubbish weight loss program!! Before the race the guys thought they might not get a run with me. By the end, Paul had done about 6 hours and Steven over 8! I could not have done it without them.

It was great also to have the support of Team Kuz – Lynne, Simon and Helena, who were with me and my team for most of the way. I felt like it was one big team, not just on race day, but over the past year.

Will I do it again next year? – damn right I will. Me and the WHW have now got issues!

Gail Murdoch 2009