

# Saturday 20th June - West Highland Way Race 2009

Scott Bradley

## To the start-line

A nice chilled-out Friday off work, and a good sleep and lie-in. Had my first dream about the race Thursday night - but not WHW somewhere else, still an ultra. Nerves finally began to kick-in Saturday, a dry throat and sniffles had developed, and even though I was mostly chilling-out on sofa and on internet, the enormity of running 95miles started to hit. Sandy arrived early evening, we chatted for a good couple of hours about the plans, then Graeme & MC arrived, we all ate, went through the checklist as we packed, and 9:30pm we were off and by now I was far from chilled-out - in fact I doubt I've ever felt so nervous before a race.

We got to Milngavie 10:45pm but the final preparations at the start-area still felt a bit too much of a rush, at first it was nice to chat with Fiona and Val in the church hall, but I then had to get back to the car, start relocating my race-food to somewhere more convenient than buried under several rucksacks in the boot, finding stuff that had been packed away (coffee, drop-bag supplies), then I had to register & get weighed-in, drink lots of coffee, queue for then try and have a crap (and fail), find out where to deposit the "Inversnaid" drop-bag, and after walking around the carpark dumbly I decided I'd been on my feet far too much pre-race, thankfully MC sorted out the dropbag so I could finally sit down and drink more of the coffee he'd made. But not for too long - I also had to collect a GPS tracker - on arriving at the hall I was told to collect it once briefing had finished (i.e., 20mins before start!), then Dario told me BBC wanted to interview but that never happened cos I was basically left with 10 minutes to get changed and sort race-gear and then Carnegie team-photo (lots of nice well-wishes exchanged) and only entered the start area with about 3mins spare... Phew!

Walked forward to near the front of the start pen then immediately got my hand shaken - "I hear you are race favourite, good luck!". It was Jan - very nice of him. But at the time I thought "Oh shit, who told him that? It that cos I had a good run in the Fling?" Besides, I was more than aware there was some serious ultra-distance talent lined-up here (including Jan himself, a dutch runner who's goal was to break Jez's record, and who, I later learned via mobile from Iain Taylor, was ranked 47th in the world). There was the consistent and experienced talent of George Cairns and my clubmate Richie Cunningham. And Indeed there were others that Ritchie had mentioned to me the weekend before. It would make for an exciting race.

1am and we were all on our way with our headtorches through Milngavie town-centre, down onto the old bikepath soon away from street-lamps and out into the darkness along the river and then through the eerie calm of Mugdock Woods. I felt great now I was running, and comfortable with the light from my headtorch showing the way nicely - maybe last weekend's practise run had helped. Within 0.5mile I found myself running with only two others ahead, and I could hear Oggy & Richie chatting a bit behind so I turned and shouted "Is this suicide pace guys?". "You'll be alright" was the reply. And possibly for the first time since Friday morning I felt relaxed and was beginning to enjoy myself.

## Through the night

This was it, the WHW race underway, the time just after 1am, it would be Saturday evening before the adventure was over and my attitude at this stage was "so much to look forward to". I remember thinking how very pleasant the conditions were too - calm, mild and dry, very much as it had been during the recce last weekend.

The two runners ahead were pulling away, Stevie and Richie had dropped back, I was scared about losing my way in the dark and whenever the lights of the runners ahead disappeared around a corner I got a touch of nerves. Like last weekend's recce I spotted a glow-worm along here!

Was nice to come back out of the woods, onto a road and see some other humans again, a good number of cars and supporters clapping me through, that was fun. Then through a gate and into darkness and quiet again, although the darkness was never complete - you could just make out the hillsides of Strathblane rising above the meadow with a subtle band of blue in the Northern sky beyond.

I came past someone sitting near the fork in the track with what sounded like Runrig being played through a loud-speaker. Was loving this now - eating jelly beans already, cruising along, but my first mistake was missing the subtle left turn onto an old railway track in spite of concentrating very hard not to miss it! Ended up running up towards a road and it was one of Jan's support crew that put me right - "Are you a runner?"

Then you have to go back..." I went back, about 200 yards and another headtorch was coming towards me obviously misled by me and together we went back further and found our way again. We chatted a bit, eventually I think he decided the pace was a bit silly and dropped back. Got into Dumgoyne and it was brilliant to see some people again, clapping me through, and a good contingent of the Harriers were there and seemingly appreciative of the fact I was "going for it". I'd lost sight of the leaders now but I felt some security in the fact they were ahead.

Now I was enjoying myself for sure. Another stretch of dark railway path then onto the three miles of country road to Drymen, forcing myself here to shuffle gently up the inclines, no runner in sight ahead nor behind, the odd car coming by to watch and wait, then found the tricky right turn down into the field before Drymen and as I climbed up through it I saw headtorches, wee red lights and realised it was the BBC crew filming the runners coming through the field. Across the road and up to another cheer from supporters, Graeme & team stationed where we'd agreed during last weekend's recce, did the camelbak swap and I was off back into the darkness within seconds with my eccles cake in hand – excellent!

And still the darkness was never complete, i.e., always some bluish tint to the North, but as I ascended easily into the forest I could sense dawn would happen very soon. Running still felt great - hardly noticed the long slow climb into the forest, crossed the road where a few support teams had parked up. Shortly after that, for the first time in a while, I saw the leaders' headtorches somewhere ahead. That was uplifting. Not that I needed it at this stage. The beam of the front headtorch kept swinging behind at me, with the second placer dropping off him now. Very slowly I was closing the gap on second but stopped to get a gel and some jellybeans, I wasn't racing anyone just now anyway and it was nice to have someone to follow. Dawn very much happening as we climbed onto the moorland below Conic Hill, Jan's headlamp quite some distance ahead now but I kept getting closer to 2nd placer - and as he jumped off the far side of a style I was within 20 yards. He pulled ahead again on Conic Hill - which I very sensibly walked up, only jogging where the slope was gentle and ignoring the increasing gap ahead. Saw a headtorch a few minutes behind at the base of the hill! I soon turned off my own headtorch as it was hindering rather than helping my vision now - a nice view of mist over the loch. BBC crew here again as I caught back up with 2nd placer, asking us how we were feeling and how we found the night section. Can't remember what I said - think the words "enjoy" and "conserving" got used. Then I was running a few paces behind 2nd placer down to Balmaha, where the support crew were ready for action with coffee and Thorntons mini caramel shortcake as requested! The latter tasted particularly good, Dario was also there with them and giving encouragement. Graeme ran with me for a bit whilst I glugged at the coffee + chocolate milk then I was off with 2nd placer following me, munching on the Krispie Bar "to go" and finding it nice and easy to eat.

## **Loch Lomond**

Said hello to 2nd placer, we didn't speak much but walked/ran together over the "hummock" and down towards one of Loch Lomond's beaches, then shortly after he uttered something to himself and decided against following me any further.

So far so good, I decided, legs feeling okay. Daylight took a long time to establish itself but there was never any need for the headtorch after Balmaha. A nice calm day was dawning too - Loch Lomond was glassy and there was no sign of imminent rain. It was a lonely run up through the trees by the loch to Rowardennan, no one in sight ahead, no one behind, and after an hour of being alone it felt so good to get to the checkpoint and see the guys there. They seemed very excited about my time (I'd been running-by-feel so ignoring pace - but I can now see why they were happy for me: ETA 5:11-5:31, actual 5:04). They said I was right behind the leader – a nice boost. They restocked me and was soon off again, only shortly afterwards I heard footfalls behind and wondered who the hell had closed me down from nowhere?

Well no one had closed me down because it was Jan - he came alongside and said "Hello, we are Number 1 and Number 2!" I think I said "cool" as he moved ahead with ridiculous ease. His style was something between a power-walk and a jog but it was misleadingly fast. I left him to it and got back into my own stride, and as we moved up the very long climb through the forest, I was feeling uncomfortably in need of a crap and so I did my first mid-race alfresco, the sense of relief afterwards was worth the inconvenience and the minutes lost.

As in the Fling I enjoyed the rougher rocky section by the loch before Inversnaid, where I was surprised to spot the leader again ahead. That was exciting - ascending to the bridge over the waterfall and on the steps down I caught up with him. He turned and told me he'd found the section by the loch "very bad", so I warned him there was worse to come. I spent a good 1 to 2 mins here with my drop-bag getting the camelbak refilled and stocked, ignoring the fact Jan had gone straight through, then with mars drink in hand I was on my way again. The drink went down easy enough during the next half mile and I stashed the empty bottle in

the bungy straps of my camelbak - this would enable me to top-up the camelbak from a waterfall later.

Enjoyed the "proper" rough section again, nice to stretch out and utilise different muscles than the running ones I guess. When I came past the wee stone bothy in the bracken meadow at the loch-side I saw Jan's white vest ahead, and he kept glancing over his shoulder. I next saw him after the roughest part of the WHW where it flattens out and starts to climb the final hill before Benglas, he'd made a bit more ground on me. I took it gentle up this hill having learned my lesson from the Fling, and the BBC crew were at the top with their mozzie head-nets on - yeah they were viscious this morning, was glad I was on the move! Think I said as much as I passed. At Benglas Farm I was expecting some water set-up, it didn't occur to me that I just needed to go to their outdoor kitchen area that they'd made available for race-use, I just cut right over the style back onto the WHW and saw Jan coming towards me looking bewildered. I thought he was asking where the water was, (cos that's what I was wondering!), but when he started to take his harvey's WHW map out and say "shall we look at the map?" I realised - "No, this is definately the right way, straight on. I know!" I said re-assuringly. "It was beautiful by the loch" he then said. I told him I was going to top-up my water from a stream and he said "Be careful with your stomach", and I smiled and said that in Scotland the water is usually pretty safe, and nice too. He disappeared ahead - I wasted quite a bit of time with that mars drink bottle, the stream and the camelbak, so much so that he was well out of sight by the time I was moving again, and even when I climbed up into the open stretch of Glen Falloch I couldn't see anyone ahead.

## The middle miles

Glen Falloch, with its openness, comparative bleakness, and persistent "upness", was a slog. I recalled finding this section similarly tough during the Fling too - this was where Jez left me for dead, and it seemed Jan had done much the same. I finally got up to Carmyle Cottage, already realising I was losing the feeling of "effortless running" and finding the going a bit tougher. As I emerged from the railway tunnel and up onto the road, there was Jan sitting on a foldy-chair getting a change of socks and shoes, my team were also there ready, and I was about to make them very busy! They switched me to my large waistpack, I couldn't feel a drink inside the pouch so requested one but the team had done right and it was in there - still poor MC went rushing back to get me another drink to put in. I'd also had my first twinge of cramp somewhere up the loch, so told them to put one of the sachets of salt into my next camelbak refill (note this seemed to work very well - never had another problem with cramp again during this run). I also pointed out to the team that my camelbak chest-strap needed fixed, the chest strap is important for limiting movement of the backpack whilst running, and it had unhooked itself when I'd refilled at the burn near Benglas - I'd given up trying to repair it myself en-situ having realised I was wasting lots of time. I dumped my Helly Hansen here at Carmyle too - it was already warm.

Two or three minutes passed, Jan was off on his way, and when I got started again I noticed how heavy and imbalanced the waistpack felt, and I hated it, my mind screaming "I want my camelbak back!". I endured another 100 yards then decided enough was enough, spun the pouch around to look inside and that's when I saw my mistake - yep I was carrying two drinks in there! I gave the excess lucozade sport to some passing walkers and felt a bit better, though still really not liking the feel of the waistpack at all. Decided I needed to get rid of it at Achtertyre - I'd apologise to the support team later but this was very important!

As I ascended to the trees where Glen Falloch becomes Glen Dochart, I had memories of the Fling race and drawing a few parallels between then and now - here I was again in second place, the leader visible ahead on his way up Glen Falloch, but like the Fling my strength had been deteriorating, the nastiest part of this moment of negativity was when I decided I wasn't feeling any fresher than I had at this stage during the Fling, and in today's race I was only just reaching half-way, in spite of running it much slower.

So I was enduring my first real low of the day. Already reaching for some kind of survival button in my mind. I was still moving forward at least, but this stretch through the forest to Achtertyre was a succession of draining ups and downs, my progress felt like a desperate crawl on the ups and a stiff-legged stumble on the downs. Was glad to cross the A82, and pleasantly surprised to spot Jan not so far ahead as I imagined, so took back some confidence from this. Arrived at Achtertyre Fm (ETA 9:22 - 9:54, Actual 9:18, oblivious to these splits at the time which is a pity, it may have given me the lift I needed), then confused the support team by my change of plan - get rid of that bloody waistpack I wanted my camelbak back. Unfortunately this wasn't filled cos I was now going against the instructions I'd left my poor team - Sandy went dashing off to the car (quite far off as they couldn't get parked next to the route). A minute passed, then another, I did some quick thinking - noticed the water bottle MC had handy and said to MC that I'd just start running now with that water bottle, would apologise to Sandy later, meet back up with the team at Tyndrum 2.5 miles down the road, and collect my filled camelbak there instead. That was a great move, cos not only did I get to start making progress again, it also allowed me a short section with just my bumbag. I realised I didn't have the GPS tracker, but figured it wouldn't matter much, particularly as the BBC crew stationed here can vouch for

the fact that, unlike my tracker I didn't do the 2.5 miles to Tyndrum at 60mph by car!

Fond memories of finishing the Fling as I retraced my steps over that final shallow burn and up the lane past the cottages. Got a pleasant surprise here at Tyndrum - Sid and Linda had driven up to support us - it was a really nice boost. My team were there with a now-filled camelbak, and my GPS, and all was normal again. "You're only 5 minutes behind him!" I was told, "go for it!". I smiled and nodded but to be honest I was not capable of racing at this point - that would come later - for now I was trying to cover ground as efficiently and comfortably as I could. It was a slow drag up out of Tyndrum but I shuffled onwards, still trying to enjoy the changing scenery, but still hurting a bit at the same time. Ben Dorain came into view, truncated somewhat by a low ceiling of cloud. There were signs of brighter weather beyond though. Another negative thought invaded my head - which was that I'd over-estimated myself, my inexperience had let me down and I had blown myself up by covering the first half of the race too fast. But that was crap really - I had definitely tried to conserve and run well-within myself, so who's to say I'd be feeling any better had I shuffled along at a slower pace - with even more distance to cover at this time?

I repeated these thoughts to the BBC camera on arrival at Bridge of Orchy, taking the chance to have a rest there even though my support team had been as efficient as ever getting my stuff prepared. Obviously I was not believing the guys when they told me I was doing well, assumed they were saying it cos I'd told them to say it in my printed instructions! (However - ETA: 10:56-11:33, Actual: 10:51 - i.e., the perceived slowness was bogus, I'd gained another minute on my own schedule). Turns out I needed that minute - and a couple more - before continuing on this crazy adventure. When I eventually set off it felt even more pathetic - there's a fairly significant climb immediately on re-starting and I decided to walk the lot and hopefully gather my strength back as I did so. It was a relief to get to the top and look down over Inveroran, Forest Lodge beyond, Stob Gabhar and Stob a' Coire Oor behind them - more familiar landmarks from my munro-bagging days. In the distance there were patches of golden sunlight on the hillsides. I felt I was moving a bit better along here but never felt strong - another BBC camera on Rannoch Moor - "Is it not awfully lonely?" I was asked. Damn straight it was - I had been running alone since 1am, 11 hours ago, and even the chance to speak or nod to WHW walkers, or camera crew, helped me a bit.

"How do you keep yourself going?" was another question. I explained the technique I'd used for the Fling that I was trying to use today, perhaps not quite so successfully - the mindset is to focus on "enjoying the moment" rather than "enduring the distance". Looking at the scenery. Feeling the enormity of what we were all doing. I needed to do more of that "enjoying" it seemed!

## **The Devil's staircase**

Was so glad to get to the downhill to Kingshouse - that was a major milestone as my mind has always considered Glencoe to be "not far from Fort William", and so a mere fraction of the distance left compared with those early dark miles in Strathblane. The team were there, reliable as ever, Graeme told me I looked really strong on the way down. You can tell he's a father - there was one point he was spooning food into my mouth whilst I was trying to put a camelbak on - again here he was stood with my raspberry jelly and spoon ready but this time I was a bad boy and only took two mouthfuls before pulling away. My real dad was stood there too, smiling at it all. They all said I was doing really well, again I didn't believe them. However I wish I'd had the balls to ask or check my ETAs (1:04 - 1:49, Actual 12:52 - they were not kidding, I was still gaining yet more time on the ambitious target I'd set myself). I also had no idea how the race around me was unravelling, other than that I was weakening and might struggle to cling to my 2nd place, forget about battling for a win here. Basically I should have finished that jelly, no matter how my stomach felt, and my support crew knew that too, but as it happened I was off running again before they or perhaps even I realised it. Getting tired, and just wanting it finished now, I jogged towards Glencoe along the singletrack road behind Kingshouse, neither the majestic sight of the Bauchaille nor the ramparts of Glencoe's Three Sisters beyond could lift my spirits now, who knows how different it may have been had I eaten that jelly or at least eaten something at Kingshouse. On this section progress didn't just feel slow, it was slow, a struggle to Altnafeadh, little more than a walk in places - I wouldn't even call it a power-walk - I could imagine there'd be a few runners behind me hunting down my Carnegie vest now.

At Altnafeadh the guys gave me my camelbak and MP3 player, I was hoping some music would lift me back out of this serious low. At first the music sure was nice, but I still felt "resigned", out for a hillwalk now, one that had already gone on for far too long. Unfortunately I'd left it on "shuffle" too - which meant I had bloody Elbow instead of Prodigy for company up the devils staircase! The "staircase" isn't that steep, nor high (from Glencoe side), but I was feeling every step of it after 75+ miles of running. Jan wasn't looking like he was going much quicker above me and that just gave me another excuse to continue shuffling. Then I looked down and saw a very different incentive - another runner had appeared on the staircase too, wearing all-black and making very impressive progress up the zig-zags, putting me to shame. Didn't know who it was at

the time, but decided it must be someone with a lot of experience to have had the patience to hold themselves back for 70+miles so that they can be so bloody strong at the business-end of the race. As I crested the staircase there was little feeling of elation, and even the new vista across to the Mamores - a sight which normally I would have admired - was frankly ignored as my head and posture was down and I was looking at stones and lumps of heather instead. I glanced behind, the all-black runner came towards me at a very different pace than mine and finally I recognised the face. "Richie!" I shouted, so grateful that my predator had turned into a familiar face, and at such a timely moment. "How you doing, Scott?" he asked politely. The answer was surely pretty obvious, and less polite. "I'm f\*\*ked Richie, I'm totally gone." He was moving so much faster he was already 20 yards past when he slowed and turned to shout at me. I can't remember the exact words. Just the gist of it. "Dig in Scott, you WILL get over it. Its all peaks and troughs. You'll come through and be strong again." And it was delivered with such assertiveness, he left me with no doubt that it was true - the exact message I needed. As he disappeared around the corner 100 yards ahead, I glanced behind and thought I saw yet another runner closing me down. (Have since established this was a hallucination. There was no-one else in such a position in the race according to the official results & splits. How devious the mind must work!) "Right enough of this, lets get over this f\*\*king trough" I thought. It was almost a bit of anger - in fact never mind "almost", this was anger at my own self-pity, and as I stretched the stride back out, the resulting ache was duly ignored, the kick was returned firmly back in the stride, I was covering the rocky ground rapidly, and within moments the ache faded out of my mind. And so I too was moving strong and fast, like I'd seen Richie demonstrate, none of this pussy feeling-sorry-for-myself hill-walk pish.

I was so impressed with this new-found speed and determination it just encouraged me even more. Perhaps too much so - as I came onto that corner I'd watched Richie disappear around I lost my footing and fell off the path onto a steep heather and boulder slope, taking a significant fall of about 15ft, sliding on my right side, shredding my shorts, creating a small hole in my right elbow which had clearly been used as a brake-pad. Oops. I was lucky this time, no real harm was done and I was able to crawl back up the slope onto the WHW and kick back up to speed. I was rapidly closing back down on Richie, clearly I was completely over my trough. I was back in the race!

Once back up with Richie It felt great to have some company, it had been so lonely thus far! We descended to Kinlochleven together, "Team Carnegie" I remember saying at the time, Richie, again very assertive, told me it was important to eat at this penultimate checkpoint in order to finish strong over the final 14 miles. Final 14miles! Another thought loaded with a huge boost. (ETA 2:50 - 3:42, Actual: 2:43!) I was buzzing again by the time I was re-united with my support crew, the spark was back, I was a human again, and I could see they knew it too! I was talking like an excited kid. "We're going to finish this", my fist was clenched, all so dramatic as my heart was on my sleeve now. Unfortunately the BBC were filming this drama-queen moment but whatever pish it was I told them I'm sure it was positive pish. As Richie had ordered, I took on food - the support team had my Apple Muller Rice ready and as soon as I had a mouthful I knew I had found another friend for my future ultras - man it tasted so good and went down so easily, it was going to help me storm that last 14miles to that finish line!

Graeme also handed me my "Asda Sour cream and chive" salty corn snacks and a handful of them went down very well too.

## The Finish

Richie wasn't quite done yet - but I was adamant I would wait for him so we could head off together and push each-other along up the next tough section - the Lairig Mór. Richie was struggling to get the food down, but he had his positive hat on, "I'll be alright, the hill will sort me out". How the heck climbing a hill could sort out his stomach is beyond me, but all that mattered was that he convinced himself of this, and sure enough he was strong on that climb, which we power-walked briskly as if starting out on a steep hill-race. It was tough going, we were both hurting, but I'd crossed a mental watershed now, 13miles to go was a distance I was very comfortable with and my legs might be aching but they had a lot left to give. Every now and then Richie surged with determination, "We should easily be on for sub-17 today" he said. Wow, I thought, that would do nicely. We both knew we were going strong, catching the leader who was in a bad way and hadn't taken on food we'd been told, so yeah this was our big final effort to go for the win now. "The pain we're feeling now," Richie gasped, "is nothing compared to the pain of not catching him."

I was dealing with each achy moment as it came, and getting through it, we were running side-by-side on the stoney landrover track, scanning the foot of the Mamore Mountains ahead for a glimpse of the leader like we were a pair of predators. We could see the track in the distance dog-legging around the Mamores, twisting and dipping over small tributaries en-route. It was before that corner we would final spot him. "Clocked him!" I shouted. Richie responded "Yep. We're pulling him in. Three minutes.". Walkers coming the other

way were joining in on the action, "Just a couple of minutes ahead, he's not looking too good". Indeed, Jan was injured and tired, his knees were sore and bleeding from a fall. Meanwhile Richie and I continued pressing each-other along to "the corner" on the Lairig Mór, and that's when a very tired and sore Richie dropped back, and I pretty much had to stop to stay with him. "You alright?". He was clutching his side and grimacing, "Scott, I'm absolutely f\*\*ked. You're going really strong. Go catch him and win this race." I hesitated a moment, but knew what I had to do... "I'll try my best." Then it was my turn to return the words of wisdom - "But remember like you said to me - peaks and troughs, you'll get through it Richie."

And I was off, back in the race, how right Richie had been, I surprised myself with how strong I could run now, faster still, no signs of cramp, no signs of injury, no need to compensate my gait for anything, it seemed I was able to stretch out my stride as if I had done a tenth of the distance I had, although there's no denying it took a shitload of willpower to do so. When I got to Lundavra there was excitement - it was my support team's turn to have instructions for me! "Scott - you can win this! He's only a minute ahead and he's in trouble. Go get him." They were in this race as much as I was and it was so nice to see their enthusiasm and encouragement - they'd had a helluva a long day (and night) too. We may have all started as rookies but as a team we had certainly come of age now! (ETA 4:14 - 5:13, Actual: 4:10 - the long break at Kinlochleven showing there, but it was already starting to pay me back, in a big way).

My first few strides forward were a bit sloppy but I soon got myself together again. Like so many times earlier in the race, there was Jan in sight merely hundreds of yards ahead, and he was glancing over his shoulder nearly every 10 seconds like a frightened deer! It was just a matter of time now, I thought, no need to rush here, because I knew my legs were in a good state and I could give-it-welly on the way down, and even if that wasn't enough I knew few would challenge me on the mile of tarmac at the end, a bit cocky of me, sure, but another mental straw to clutch. Jan was at the top of the first of two bracken-clad bumps before the path starts descending down into the glen and forest beyond. By the time I was descending the first bump, he was only starting to ascend the second, I guessed he'd pretty much given up. When I got within 10 yards he stopped and turned around, shrugged, and pointed at his two blood-caked knees. For that moment I found myself feeling pity for him, and as I came by he had the good grace to wish me luck, yet again. He asked how much further back to 3rd place, so I guessed about 2 minutes, then wished him luck too. This was a race though, and so it was time for me to do the racing thing and push hard now for a big enough gap, get myself off his radar, and secure a winning lead. Now I was the frightened deer, and after only minutes of this I glaced behind, peering through the pine trees for a sight of a runner, and thank heavens there was none. Facing forwards again, Ben Nevis was now in view. Within minutes, so it seemed, the WHW track emerged onto the wide gravel forest road and Fort William and Corpach were visible too, such a buzz to behold! So close... I was going to push this hard to the end, I was scared shitless to be honest but knew I was flying down that gravel zig-zag. Here I was leading the WHW with only a few miles to go, thinking that if I throw this away now I'm never going to forgive myself. I remembered hearing at the briefing that I should ignore a WHW post down here, just head straight down the track to Braveheart Carpark - last night I'd tried to clarify these directions with Fiona Rennie too but at this tense moment I was still paranoid I might blow my race by screwing up one final turn. Thankfully I saw a sign for Braveheart Carpark pointing straight down the track, opposite that WHW post I had been told about, and so the instructions all made sense and with relief I headed straight downwards. I glanced behind me back up the track - I could see a long way back and no-one was up there - but fear kept me pushing hard and I wasn't going to let go until I got to that finish line.

Emerging on the road in Glen Nevis, striding along, wondering how much further, geez it felt like I was finishing a local 10k now! The 30mph signs came into view, another lift. I kicked again, an imaginary challenger on my heels. Then the thistle sign marking the end of the WHW was visible, I ran into the visitors centre by accident, totally confused, and started asking people if they knew where the finish was. What a muppet - all that careful preparation and yet I'd forgotten to learn where the finish line was! Nevermind, I got put right and got going again down into Ft. William, searching ahead yet again for some kind of indication of a finish line. This was cruel! Just starting to panic as the road straightened and I saw a crowd of people and a big sign, it marked the entrance to the Lesuire Centre - of course!

They were cheering and Dario was there waving me on towards the doors, like Edinburgh Marathon, the cheer made me think someone was about to take me on the final bend so I kept the effort hard to the doors, saw the team and dad there with big grins on their faces as I ran into the centre and used a wall to stop me. Then used a banister to hold me upright, and as I looked up a BBC camera was there filming me drooling over the railing. I actually felt surprisingly good at first, but not good enough to enjoy the elation of what had just happened. I didn't even know my time, was hoping it was sub-17 like Richie had assured back in Lairig Mór but when Dario told me "16:11:56, absolutely brilliant time, second fastest ever," I stared back in disbelief.

## Reflection

Both finishing first, and clocking that time, was way beyond anything I dared to aspire to during those weeks of hard training and careful preparation beforehand. I had even cringed whilst preparing that instruction sheet for the support team, putting ETAs with a projected 16:30-17:30 finish - knowing that my longest run before today, let alone longest race, had been the 53 mile Fling. I've enjoyed some great achievements this year, including the Highland Fling which I had admitted to myself might be the best thing I ever do in my running career - esp. as it was all so unexpected. But now I have this too - sure I worked hard for it, had a bit of luck, rode out the ups and downs, but in the end nailed it. And how great it was to share the win with my best mates as the team - they'd given up their weekend for me and how better could I pay them back? We even got to the pub after as was promised. What a f\*\*king year! And now some lessons...

- \* Top eats: Muller Rice, rice krispy squares, tomato soup in mug, Asda sour cream + chives corn snacks, gels.

- \* Top drinks: flat coke + water, cup of ginger beer was a nice change with meals, orange also nice change

- \* Top gear: small waistpack, camelbak + swapping off, having a break from it too (even Jan uses same one)

- \* Won't do again: flapjacks, pancakes, mars drink, OMM waistpak

- \* OK: Banana (but needed to shit soon after), jellybeans - if more convenient, Thorntons caramel sq., ginger pieces, eccles cakes. Psychology - wouldn't change it. Sure I had a bad low, who didn't? I had a cue and took it, and got over it.