

Devil o' the Highlands Footrace

Saturday 8th August 2009

Race Tale by John Kynaston

This race was the 3rd in my 2009 challenge and the 7th ultra I have run in the last three years. It was also the shortest at 42miles and my plan was to try and push as hard as I could without any stops on the way, aiming for sub 7hrs which was my gold medal goal at the beginning of the year.

Pre-Race

I was up at 3.30am, had some breakfast, changed and we left Paisley at 4.10am. Katrina had very kindly offered to support once again despite the crazy early start. The rest of our girls were working or away so it was just Katrina this time. Sadly Neal, Caroline and Chris who had originally planned



to run the race had to pull out but were still coming to watch the race so if I needed I knew I could call on them! Just before we left I received a text from Chris saying, 'Not sure which is crazier? Being up at this time of day to raceor being up at this time of day to watch you race????'

We had a straight forward journey and arrived at Tyndrum at 5.20am in time to register and listen to the pre-race briefing from Garry. Also time to greet friends and wish everyone a great race. Debs and Silke looked ready and excited by the challenge as was I.

I thought I might have an outside chance in the Super Vet race and just before the start I Mike Thomson said to me we'd have our work cut out as Bill Maxwell (who won the Fling Super Vet) was a late entry. Oh well I thought my time is the key thing.

Section 1: Tyndrum to Bridge of Orchy (6.62miles)



I started about a third down the field and within the first half mile I caught up with Ian and Debs and we ran together for a mile or two. Debs was looking good and based on our training run two weeks ago I knew she was going to have a great run. She dropped off a little and I thought that was very sensible as she needed to find her own pace. At the first little hill I continued to run and Ian must have walked as I didn't see him again until the end.

Once I was under the railway I looked at my watch and for the first section of 3.34 miles I wanted to be running at 8.33 pace and I was a little down on that so stretched my legs a bit and slower caught up with 2 guys ahead. Then once past the bridge I slowly caught 2 more and then basically ran in with one of them into Bridge of Orchy. Everything felt fine and it was great to be back on the route and running steady. I starting eating after 30mins or so and taking regular sips of water.

Katrina was waiting for me just before the railway station. For this race I was keen not to stop so Katrina had what I wanted laid out and within 20secs I grapped the food and water and was off.

I went through Bridge of Orchy just under the 55mins I'd planned.

Plan: 55mins

Actual: 54mins 41secs (8.16 pace)

Section 2: Bridge of Orchy to Kingshouse (12.04miles)

There was a good crowd at the check point and I recognised a few people and thanked them as I ran past. I headed up the hill and ran for most of it before having my first walk of the day for the top half. One person shouted, 'Number 15 you are 15th!' so it was good to get an idea of what place I was.



On the hill out of Bridge of Orchy I was passed by a guy called Ian who is in the same club as Stuart Hay whose blog I follow. He was going well and I never saw again so assumed he finished ahead of me!

After a mile or so I saw Mike Thomson. Mike and I had a see saw battle in the Fling in April which Mike eventually won by 42secs. As I caught up with him I said will this be the first of many crossing today. He replied that he may have gone off too quick and he did look as though he was finding it tough. Sadly Mike had to drop out just before the Devil's staircase with a recurrence of his IT problems.

Some of the guys who I'd passed before bridge of Orchy went past me and were a lot stronger on the down hills but I was on my plan and content to let them go and run my own race and plan. If they had gone too quick they would come back but if not no problem! I saw George near Inveronan Hotel and then Marco at Victoria bridge, who happily told me Debs wasn't far behind!

I reached my next mini-mark (the gate after the road) 5mins faster than my plan which was encouraging as it gave me some leeway. At the gate I saw John, Aileen's partner, and I assumed she must be not far behind. But within a few minutes I saw her ahead! The reason I was surprised was that before the race Aileen said she has only run one since the whw. I think Aileen has run the same number of races as me over the last 3 years and in each one she sets off hard and it seems to work for her. Anyway over the next couple of miles I slowly caught up with her and we had a brief chat as I went past.



I was still running steady and reached my next mark 2secs quicker than planned!! Talk about getting my pace just right. I was holding my position in the race which is always a good sign. I could see a couple of runners ahead but I wasn't really catching them.

At the top of the hill Murdo McEwan was there taking photos. He said I was looking good and running strong which encouraged me as I did feel as though I was going well.

The Devil's race uses the Glencoe Ski lodge as a checkpoint rather than Kingshouse but I decided to do my splits to Kingshouse as I am a man of tradition and routine!!

Two marshals helped me across the A82 and I ran into Kingshouse five and a half minutes ahead of schedule and feeling good. Katrina, Neal, Caroline, Chris and Marco were all there and it was great having their support and encouragement. I didn't stay to chat though and once again I grapped what I wanted and was away.

Plan: 1hr 50mins

Actual: 1hr 44mins 50secs (8.45 pace)

Section 3: Kingshouse to Kinlochleven (9.06 miles)

I knew this next section was going to be key. Two weeks ago we did a training run from Kingshouse to Fort William and I'd run this bit in 1hr 40mins and knew there was little room for error. So I was keen to make sure I ran all the runnable bits and walked hard on the rest.

I took with me a banana and a bottle of lucozade sports drink which I ate and drank by the time I got to my first mark at the base of the staircase. I was happy to see that I was just over 3mins up on my plan.



As I climbed up the staircase I saw Chris, Neal & Caroline ahead. They had decided to have some exercise themselves and support me on the climb. They had written in chalk on one of the stones 'Go JK' so that made me smile.

I caught up with Neal & Caroline who were both finding the climb hard. They had both planned to run this race but had been ill during the week and had pulled out. They only returned from Africa a week ago having climbed Mt Kilimanjaro was it was always gong to be difficult to be ready for the race. Chris was further up and I went past him just before the top.

On the switchbacks up the hill I caught sight of the runner in a white vest and thought he may well be catching me. Once over the top and heading down he did do just that but seemed content to run behind me even when I offered to let him go past. I hit my next

mark 53 secs early and overall I was 10mins up on my sub 7hr schedule.

The last mini section into Kinlochleven was 3.40miles and I'd allocated 30mins which is 8.48 pace. It is mostly downhill but I knew from our training run that I needed to push hard. The guy in the vest went past at some point and I tried to stay with him and hope he's pull me down the hill.

Once we got onto the wider steep pace I could see him and so worked hard on the downhill. As I ran I imagined Stevie and Chris were with me. On the training run two weeks ago Stevie set a cracking pace down so I imagined he was just ahead and I was trying to stay with him. I also imagined Chris repeating his comment that I was running like a girl!!! So I concentrated on leaning forward and landing on the front of my foot rather than my heels. It must have worked as I caught the guy in white and pushed on into Kinlochleven.

I had run the section almost 5mins faster than planned and was now still 10mins ahead of my sub 7hr schedule. I wondered whether 6.45 might be on??

Plan: 1hr 40mins

Actual: 1hr 35mins 38secs (10.32)

Section 4: Kinlochleven to Lundavra.

Katrina was waiting with Phil Tipping and once again a super quick pit stop and I was away.

The guy in white caught me as we walked up and we chatted a bit as we walked. His name was Mark (or it might have been Martin?) and was from Burnley. He said he'd run the Fling last year and when I asked him his time he said 'oh 8hrs 30mins or so.' As my best is 9.46 I knew I was doing well to be this close to him.

Maybe he realised I shouldn't be anywhere near him but he pushed on when we got to the top of the hill and very soon he was a small dot in the distance.

This was definitely my toughest section of the whole race. In our training run I'd run from the top of the hill to Lundavra without stopping and had hoped I might be able to do the same but very quickly I knew that wasn't going to happen.

I tried my best but my legs were feeling the effects of the run and looking back I probably hadn't eaten enough. I'd had 4 gels by now and some sweets and a couple of muesli bars but was starting to run out of energy.

My first mini-mark was 2.98 miles and I'd given myself 37mins. 40mins went by and I was still almost half a mile to go. I eventually reached the point in 45mins so I'd lost 8 and the 10mins I'd built up over the last 5hrs in less than an hour!

So I had to regroup, tell myself that I'm still 2mins up on my sub 7hr schedule and get going! I was passing lots of walkers who were on their last leg of walking the whw. After a mile or so I sensed a runner catching me and it was Helen Johnstone who went on to win the Ladies race. She was running really strongly and I told her so! She was just what I needed! Someone to focus on and I worked hard to try and stay with her for as long as possible. So thanks Helen for pulling me through a tough section.

I arrived at the sheep pen almost 3mins faster than my plan so I had clawed back some of the earlier lost time. I ran into Lundavra in just over 1hr 30mins against the 1hr 25mins I'd planned and the 1hr 16mins I did on the recent training run.

Marco was there waiting for Debs and he very kindly refilled my water bottle for the final section to the finish.

Plan: 1hr 25mins

Actual: 1hr 30mins 29secs (12mins pace)

Section 5: Lundavra to Fort William (6.74 miles)

I was now just under 5mins ahead of my sub 7hr schedule and fairly confident that I would be able to do it. I could see Helen ahead but could see that she was going away from me.

I decided to try and run as much as I could until I hit the road at the top of the hill and then push as hard as I could all the way to the finish. I felt okay but was conscious of slipping behind the required average pace. I'd planned to run 3.18 miles in 35mins but in the end it took me over 42mins so now I was 3mins behind schedule.

For the first time in the whole run I thought I might not do it and it annoyed me! I knew I could run from the top of the hill to the end in 30mins and I had 32mins so it was still on if I could run down that hill as hard as possible.

Once I got onto the wide road I was feeling good and concentrated on leaning forward and I repeated over and over 'push, push push, push, push.' Half way down I looked at my average pace for the section and it was 7.40 so I knew I was making up time.



I didn't stop and pushed hard. I went past the official route that goes right through the forest and arrived at the Braveheart Car Park in 20mins 35secs (as against the 25mins planned) so I was back on track. I had just over 11mins to run the final 0.89mile – no problem!

I saw Marco who told me to get a move on as he had predicted 6hrs 52mins 50secs!

Once on the road I concentrated on running as hard as I could. There were a number of signs painted on the road for the runners saying 'well done', 'nearly there' etc.

I saw the 30 sign, ran up the slight incline and then I could see the finish and friends cheering me on. I pushed as hard as I could and finished in 6hrs 55mins 35secs.

Plan: 1hr 10mins

Actual: 1hr 09mins 57secs (10.26)

Over all: 6hrs 55mins 35secs (9.55 pace)

After the race

I was very satisfied with my run. At Kinlochleven I did wonder whether I could have got nearer 6hrs 45mins but considering how things went from there I was really pleased to get under 7hrs which was always my goal.

I discovered that I'd finished 14th and that I was 2nd Super Vet. Bill Maxwell had finished a couple of places ahead in 6hrs 48mins.

We waited around for a few minutes and saw Debs storming home in 7hrs 8mins for 2nd place in the Ladies race. What a superb run and well deserved.

I was getting cold and my legs were seizing up so we headed over to the Nevis Centre for a shower and some food before going back to see Silke finish her first ultra in a very creditable 9hrs 18mins.

As I had my shower I met Bill Maxwell and congratulated him on his win. He said that he only decided to run this week because his wife, who originally had a place, wanted to run in another race next weekend. A few minutes later I was chatting to Katrina and Ritchie (who finished 4th) and relating the story that it was Bill's wife's fault that I didn't win the Super Vets race when Bill's wife who was sitting next to us said, 'I'm sorry!!'

So 3 down 2 to go in my 2009 challenge. My focus is completely on the Hardmoors 110. 7 weeks to go.

Finally a big thank you to Katrina for her support and help. She's not called 'Saint Katrina' by Debs for nothing!

Thanks too to Neal, Caroline, Chris & Harvey for supporting throughout the day and to Stevie who rode up on his bike to Fort William to see the finish.

